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# Vatican official: Pope's Twitter account teaches us about authority

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 21, 2013 NCR Today

Because of its expanding use of social media and handling of Pope Francis' wildly popular Twitter account, the Vatican is learning a wide range of lessons on the nature of authority in the 21st century, one of the officials who handles its new media outreach has said.

At the center of those lessons, said Msgr. Paul Tighe, is the fact that the church can no longer claim authority without working for it.

"The social media landscape is peer to peer, it's free and it's open," said Tighe, the second-in-command at the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications, speaking Saturday at a conference on the use of so-called new media.

"That's not the immediate description of the church at times," he continued. "What we need to realize is when in an environment where authority is different ... authority, broadly, we have to earn it rather than we can claim it."

Tighe, an Irishman who served as the director of public affairs for the Dublin archdiocese before taking up the job as secretary for the pontifical council in 2007, gave the keynote at the conference, hosted by the Boston archdiocese.

Speaking for more than an hour, the Vatican official laced his talk with both tidbits on the inside day-to-day running of the pope's Twitter accounts, available in English @Pontifex [1]and in several other languages, and with deeper insights into what his council's work means for the future direction of the church.

Explaining that the pope's Twitter posts, called tweets, are re-tweeted more than any other public figure, Tighe said that shows that church "comes not from the center, but from the local."

"How would it look for the church to build a capillary network?" he asked. "So that the church becomes interactive, using the platform of the Pontifex account."

He said people who re-tweet the pope may end up "touching the hearts of people who might not normally choose to read the Gospel message or the thought of the church."

Tighe also said Vatican officials were surprised with how quickly Twitter followers latched onto the pope's efforts for a day of prayer for peace in Syria [2] as part of his call against U.S. military intervention in the country.

Officials at the communications office chose for the event a special hashtag -- a way for Twitter users to easily categorize each others tweets -- labeled #Prayforpeace.

"It's almost like the hashtag became the point of contact for Catholic communities around the world to get that message out there," said Tighe.

"The hashtag created this almost subversive network of people who were getting the word out there, even though it wasn't getting a huge amount of play in the mainstream media."

Tighe also said his office was surprised at how quickly the pope's first message in English [3], made Friday for a conference in the Philippines, spread on Facebook. Within 3.5 hours of posting, Tighe said, some 250,000 Facebook users had shared the message.

Church officials, Tighe said, have to realize that young people in the 21st century are "forming relationships and creating community in a different way."

"That is challenging all of us because the change is not in technologies, but it's a change in communication itself," he said.

Tighe also likened the church's work in the digital sphere, what he called the "digital continent," with its evangelization of the world's physical continents in past centuries. Missionary efforts in places like Africa or Asia "began with an understanding of the language and its culture," he said.

Coming to the concept of authority, Tighe said members of his generation grew up with a linear sense of communication and authority.

"We grew up with the idea of the pulpit," he said. "I'm here. I talk; you listen. The microphone let us reach further. The radio took us even further. The TV let you see us as well as hear us. But we were at the center and you were out there consuming."

"New media is different," he continued. "I speak, I talk, I reflect, I say something. If you like it, or if you disagree with it enough to comment on it ? you might share it."

"It's participative," he said. "It's interactive. If I say something, I have to be prepared to answer questions back."

Pope Francis has some 10 million followers on Twitter across accounts in eight languages. Tighe's office manages those accounts as well as many of the Vatican's other social media efforts, including the News.va [4] portal, which collects many of the pope's statements and official acts on one website.

Following is video of Tighe's full address at the Boston conference, made available by the archdiocese. His remarks start at about the six-minute mark.

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**UPDATE**: The Pontifical Council for Social Communications has now made an unofficial transcript of Tighe's remarks available online **here** [7].

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[1] http://twitter.com/pontifex

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