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Catholic bloggers meet at the Vatican

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VATICAN CITY
The Catholic Church needs active members who blog, but Catholic bloggers also need the church, especially to remind them of the virtue of charity needed in their writing, said participants at a Vatican meeting.

The meeting May 2 was sponsored by the pontifical councils for culture and for social communications.

The councils accepted requests to attend, then drew the names of the 150 participants once the requests were divided according to geography, language and whether the blog was personal or institutional.

Richard Rouse, an official at the culture council, said news of the Vatican meeting already has encouraged other church officials to begin a dialogue with local bloggers.

The Vatican meeting, he said, was not designed as a how-to seminar, and it was not aimed at developing a code of conduct, but rather to acknowledge the role of blogs in modern communications and to start a dialogue between the bloggers and the Vatican.

Father Roderick Vonhogen, a Dutch priest and author of "Katholiek Leven" ("Catholic Life"), told the meeting that blogging "allows me to be a shepherd for people who need one, not those who already have one" because they are active in a parish.

"If you write a blog post and no one comments, you feel miserable ... alone and isolated," he said. The comments let the writer and readers experience being part of a community.

But, it's only when you have established interest and friendship that you can bring someone to faith, Father Vonhogen said.

Elizabeth Scalia, who writes "The Anchoress," said that while the mainstream media tend to view blogs as "little more than a means of self-promotion," the Catholic blogs generally are real sources of "Catholic clarity."

But bloggers can't claim to be purveyors of clarity unless they do so with charity, she said.

"Charity is one of the biggest challenges we face," she said, because "freedom is both a gift and a source of temptation for our egos."

Scalia said that the Catholic blogosphere is host to too much "us and them" on both the conservative and liberal sides of the church.

As Catholics, she said, "we have no business fostering enemies."

"The church needs us," Scalia said. "It needs us for evangelization. It needs us to disseminate information and

often to correct information."

"The church needs us to be where the sheep are grazing," but at the same time, bloggers need the church and its pastors to remind them that God's mercy reaches out to all people and that Jesus wants his followers to be united, she said.

Archbishop Claudio Celli, president of Pontifical Council for Social Communications, welcomed the bloggers to the Vatican and told them the Vatican wanted to begin "a dialogue between faith and the emerging culture" that is the blogosphere.

Rocco Palmo, author of "Whispers in the Loggia," told the gathering that the 150 invitees represented "many of the finest professional communicators" working for the Catholic Church, although it is rare that any of them is paid for blogging.

The meeting, he said, is recognition of "our contribution to the life of the church."

One of the discussion topics at the meeting was the fact that blogging already is changing because, in many countries, Twitter's 140-character messages are becoming a more popular form of communication.

Another theme involved the use on blogs of copyrighted stories and photographs taken from news sites.

Mattia Marasco, author of "WikiCulture," told the group that while it was right to acknowledge the source of material, copyrights are "an old model for a new media."

Father Vonhogen said professional journalists will have to get used to their material being taken, knowing that it amounts to free publicity and that if they are good journalists they will survive.

"If they steal some of your content, as long as you put out quality, you will make it," he said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told the bloggers that while Pope Benedict XVI "is a person who does not Tweet or have a personal blog, he is very attentive and knows well what is happening in the world" and supports Catholic media efforts, as seen by his Good Friday television interview and by his book-length interview with the German writer Peter Seewald.

"Bloggers are important" for forming and informing church members, Father Lombardi said, but anyone who influences what Catholics think must recognize the responsibility that brings with it.

Father Lombardi said he had to thank bloggers for the times they acted to explain and spread church teaching and the thought of Pope Benedict.

But he also said that the whole question of bloggers' self-centeredness and "ego" is "one of the problems which is worth reflecting on," because while it is a danger for all communicators, a communicator who calls him- or herself Catholic must focus first on serving others.

Thomas Peters, who writes "American Papist," earned a strong round of applause when he asked Father Lombardi to include bloggers on the list of communicators who get advanced copies of Vatican documents; he said large secular media outlets get early copies and often use the time to prepare stories that are not correct.

Father Lombardi said the Vatican press office releases information and documents to all accredited journalists at the same time, not making a distinction between major newspapers and Catholic outlets. One effort that may help, he said, is his work to improve collaboration with the communications offices of bishops' conferences and dioceses to ensure news gets out quickly and accurately.

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