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Vatican communications undergo changes in response to new technology

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Vatican Radio will end its short- and medium-wave broadcasts to Europe and North and South America on July 1, and a month later, the Vatican press office will close the Vatican Information Service, a multilingual daily summary of papal speeches and appointments.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office and of Vatican Radio, announced the changes Tuesday, saying they were responses to developments in technology and would save the Vatican money.

The changes at Vatican Radio, he said, should save the Vatican "hundreds of thousands" of dollars just in electricity bills each year. But the radio station is not reducing the number of programs or the 40 languages in which the programs are produced.

The decision to stop the short- and medium-wave broadcasts reflect the fact that Europe, North and South America are well covered by local radio stations that re-broadcast Vatican Radio programs and a large portion of their populations have access to radio programs via the Internet.

Short- and medium-wave broadcasts to Africa, parts of the Middle East and Asia will continue, he said, because fewer people have access to the Internet there and most of the stations rebroadcasting Vatican Radio programs are located only in big cities.

"Over the course of the 20th century, the international short- and medium-wave transmissions of Vatican Radio were a service of inestimable value in the history of the church -- especially in Europe -- supporting those populations oppressed by war and totalitarianism," Lombardi said.

The Jesuit said ending the broadcasts to Europe, North and South America would cut in half the hours of transmission from the Vatican's antenna field at Santa Maria di Galeria outside Rome. He said the decision was motivated strictly by the fact that new technology has made the broadcasts superfluous and had nothing to do with concerns about the potential health dangers posed by electromagnetic emissions from the transmission center.

Residents near Santa Maria di Galeria sued Vatican Radio in the late 1990s, saying the transmissions exceeded levels set under Italian law. In 2005, an Italian court cleared the radio station and, Lombardi said, already by August 2001 the antenna field had reduced emissions to below the Italian limit.

The Vatican Information Service, which provides summaries of Vatican news in daily English, French or Spanish emails to 60,000 subscribers, will be replaced by a multilingual summary of the Vatican press office's daily news bulletin, he said.

VIS, which traditionally suspended publication for the month of August, will end operations July 31 and the new multilingual bulletin will debut in September, Lombardi said.

Lombardi said five members of VIS' seven-member staff will work for the press office, either translating entire papal speeches or at least providing summaries of them in English, French and Spanish. The other two staffers, he said, would join the team producing www.news.va, a Vatican news aggregator, which publishes in English, French, Spanish and Italian.

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