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... And now a word from God's sponsor

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

Now I know the shift in mainstream media has gone global: Vatican Radio is now airing commercials.

Here in Hollywood, word came just a few days ago that the 'upfront' advertising season has finally gotten underway. During the upfronts, big Madison Avenue ad agencies spend billions buying television time in advance of the coming fall season. The horse-trading usually begins in May, when the networks announce their new shows and schedules, and is typically wrapped up by the July 4th holiday.

But this year, networks and advertisers were locked in a stalemate. Television execs did not want to cut the ad rates they charge, while Madison Avenue (faced with nervous clients battling a long recession) demanded sharp reductions.

It looks like this will all shake out somewhere in the middle, as these things often do - a moderate cut in ad rates that will mean more belt-tightening all around, but should hopefully stave off deep budget cuts and layoffs in the entertainment industry.

Which leads, oddly enough, to Vatican Radio. According to Sunday's Los Angeles Times, for the first time in its nearly 80-year history, the official voice of the Church is airing advertisements in an effort to moderate growing financial losses.

It's a three-month experiment; the sole advertiser is Enel, Italy's largest power company. The Times doesn't report how much money is coming in from Enel, but it does say that Vatican Radio ran a \$22 million deficit last year. Clearly, the Holy See figures that can't go on - not in tough times like these.

"It's like having an 80-year-old child living at home all this time, and you say, 'Darling, we still love you, you can go on living here, we're not going to kick you out, but it would be nice if you would contribute to

paying the phone bill, the gas bill or something, ' " said Sean-Patrick Lovett, director of Vatican Radio's English and Italian sections.

Lovett said the revenue from the Enel experiment will most likely be modest, but will send a signal to the rest of the Vatican that his office understands the current times demand fresh thinking. He said he'll keep an ear out for reaction from his listeners.

But so far, Lovett told the Times, 'no one has screamed 'Heresy!''

Well, that's one big difference then: it seems like someone screams 'Heresy!' at Hollywood every day.

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