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Vatican searches Google for Internet lessons

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Surprised when an ultra-traditionalist bishop whom he had welcomed back into the Catholic Church turned out to have been a fervent and public Holocaust-denier, Pope Benedict XVI declared in March that he had "learned the lesson" that the Vatican would have to "pay greater attention" to the Internet.

Eight months later, the Vatican has been doing just that, with a four-day conference, Nov. 12-15, on the "Internet culture and church communication" -- or how to evangelize in the information age.

In his message to the gathering, sponsored by an umbrella group of European bishops' conferences, Benedict likened the "new technological culture" to the "pagan milieu of the Greek and Roman world" through which St. Paul spread the Christian message in the first century.

French Bishop Jean-Michel di Falco Leandri stressed the need for quicker communication by recalling the controversy over the Holocaust-denying bishop, Richard Williamson, and another that broke out in March, after the pope told reporters accompanying him to Africa that the distribution of condoms aggravates the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Leandri also made an example of evangelical Web sites, which he said are more popular in the French-speaking world than their Catholic counterparts, despite the Catholic Church's superior numbers.

"How should we explain this?" Leandri asked, according to the Zenit news agency, before explaining that "Evangelicals come out of themselves to put themselves in others' shoes. They respond to needs. ... Catholic sites are centered on themselves."

Archbishop Claudio Celli, head of the Vatican's communications office, lamented that the vast majority of Catholic sites have not yet embraced the interactive applications collectively known as "Web 2.0."

To help address that and other deficiencies, the bishops have also been hearing from outside experts, including executives from Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube.

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