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The muffled message of Catholic media

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A participant uses an Apple iPad during the Catholic Press Congress at the Vatican Oct. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)

VATICAN CITY -- The Catholic Church obviously believes it has an important message to share with the world. And with relatively easy access to the printing press, the airwaves and the Internet, it would seem that communicating the Gospel would be easier than ever today.

In North America and Europe, especially, the church has relied for decades on the Catholic press to provide the faithful with news, information and the perspective they need to understand the church's position on a variety of current political, social and ethical issues.

Church officials, though, recognize that even as opportunities to communicate expand, its message is often muffled.

Pope Benedict XVI, meeting Catholic journalists and communications professionals Oct. 7, said that despite the "multiplication of antennas, dishes and satellites," the printed word is still essential for communication, especially for a church community that draws its inspiration from Scripture.

"The search for truth must be pursued by Catholic journalists with passionate minds and hearts, but also with the professionalism of competent workers with sufficient and effective instruments," he said.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications invited journalists and communications experts from 85 countries to the Vatican Oct. 4-7 for a congress on the Catholic press.

Pope Benedict said that while new media can help spread information, often it is focused on attention-grabbing images and makes little or no attempt to help people understand what is happening or what it means for their lives.

The job of a journalist, he said, is to channel the flow of information in a way that helps people make sense of it. And the job of a Catholic journalist is to help readers evaluate events in light of church teaching.

Organizing the congress, the pontifical council actually tried something a bit novel for a Vatican meeting: It filled the speakers' slots mostly with people who actually work in the media.

The few bishops and Vatican officials who did speak at the conference work with the media on a regular basis.

Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, president of the council, said the Catholic press faces the same challenges of falling subscriptions, plummeting ad revenues and competition from Internet sites that most newspapers are facing. But it also faces challenges tied directly to the identity and mission of the Catholic press itself.

The participating journalists echoed the call for the Catholic press to see its role as service to the church and to the truth, but they also insisted that they can't do their jobs without honesty and transparency on the part of church leaders.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told the congress that communication can be effective only if the messenger -- whether an individual or an institution -- is credible, and as the fallout of the clerical sex abuse scandal has shown, the only way to be credible is to be transparent.

But the Catholic journalists, mostly laypeople, also tried to drive home to the church officials a need to recognize how communications works in the Internet age. The World Wide Web isn't simply an electronic slate where a newspaper can be posted instead of being printed.

The Internet, and especially blogs and social media such as Facebook have created a new style of communications that is interactive, something most institutional church efforts -- from homilies to the Vatican website -- have never encouraged.

The Catholic bloggers, newspaper editors and website operators at the conference said people today -- especially those under 35 -- expect to be able to pose questions, replies and comments. The Catholic Church clearly wants to draw people into parish life and encourage them to share their faith with others, but opening even a tiny comment box on an "official" church website is still seen as too risky.

It's not that caution and control aren't smart, several participants said.

Anna Arco, a blogger and editor at the Catholic Herald in England, described the Catholic blogosphere as "lively, loud and argumentative." She said some Catholic blogs have been ignorant, hurtful and aggressive, but generally when the bloggers are taken seriously as communicators who have something to say in the church, they tend to grow more responsible in what they publish and in the tone they use.

"People have turned to blogs because they have not been heard, because their concerns are not being listened to or even taken seriously," she said.

Jesus Colina, director of Zenit news, said the "original sin" of Catholic communications efforts is that they are designed to speak to the faithful, but not to listen to them.

In addition, he said, while the church claims a unique expertise in creating community, Catholic media tend to give voice only to the bishop and a few priests.

Helen Osman, secretary for communications at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, showed congress participants examples of how the bishops' conference and its various departments are using social media to communicate.

"There are risks involved" in opening channels for interactive Internet content, she said, "but the great risk is that we don't engage" with Catholics who don't read Catholic newspapers or with the wider public.

Father Lombardi said the almost infinite number of "Catholic" voices in the media today means church officials

and Catholic communicators must strengthen their conviction that "for us communications is and must be to promote communion, dialogue and mutual understanding."

Real Catholic communicators do not speak to affirm themselves, "but to meet, listen to and understand others," discovering the best way to share with them the Gospel message and the hope it holds for their lives, Father Lombardi said.

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