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Changes at the Vatican Press Office

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 14, 2006 All Things Catholic

The Vatican announced Tuesday that the longtime Director of the Holy See Press Office, Spanish layman Joaquin Navarro-Valls, has been replaced by Jesuit Fr. Federcio Lombardi, the head of both Vatican Radio and Vatican Television.

Lombardi will hold onto those jobs while he steps into the Press Office.

An assessment of Navarro-Valls' legacy, including his contribution to the pontificate of John Paul II and to the media sophistication of the Vatican, will have to await a future column.

For the moment, it's worth noting that one of the most frequent complaints from cardinals and others in recent years about the Vatican's communications operation is that there are too many separate fiefdoms, often speaking independently of one another: Vatican Radio, Vatican Television, the Press Office, *L'Osservatore Romano*, and so on.

With Lombardi's appointment, most of these organs are now under a single leader.

One intriguing question is whether this marks the completion of the long-awaited "consolidation" of the communications operation, or if another shoe is waiting to drop, perhaps in a reform or reconsolidation of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, led by American Archbishop John Foley. Sources told *NCR* this week that it's not yet clear what, if anything, might happen on that front.

While Lombardi is well-known and well-regarded in Rome, there's little question he will be a more behind-the-scenes figure than Navarro-Valls, who was the public face of the Vatican for most of John Paul's papacy, commanding a higher media profile than most cardinals.

The appointment also means a return to having a priest in charge of the communications operation, rather than a lay person who comes out of professional journalism. All this suggests that the Press Office may not play the central role under Benedict XVI that it did under John Paul II.

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Of course, the question of the church and the media is broader than who runs the Vatican Press Office. There's much creative work out there, one example of which is a nascent Catholic television network in Canada, "Salt + Light TV."

Run by Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, who was the chief executive for World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002, the network has just issued two new documentaries, both of which air in July: "Opus Dei: Decoding God's Work," and "The Saints: Gospel Artists."

In the interests of full disclosure, I was interviewed for the first production, and played a minor role in a Roman event which forms part of the second. That aside, the documentaries represent interesting attempts to produce church-related TV that has an evangelical dimension, but that's also competitive in the marketplace of secular communications.

Information is available at the network's web site: style="FONT-WEIGHT: bold; FONT-SIZE: 10pt; COLOR: #000099; FONT-FAMILY: Arial" href="http://www.saltandlighttv.org/">http://www.saltandlighttv.org/.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **href="mailto:jallen@natcath.org">jallen@ncronline.org**

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