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Vatican helps launch church-approved ads for Catholic websites

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VATICAN CITY -- An Italian startup is launching a web advertising platform that aims to provide Catholic websites with Catholic-approved advertisements.

The platform, called AdEthic, will be presented Thursday at a press conference in Rome, as part of a wider Catholic project to engage in social media.

According to Andrea Salvati, a manager at Google Italy who will take the role of CEO at AdEthic in October, the platform wants to tap into the vast Catholic online market that has so far been unable or unwilling to use advertisements.

Many Catholic webmasters are "scared" that inappropriate advertisements, such as sexually related content or messages from "bogus religious groups," will be displayed on their pages by context-sensitive automatic ad generators such as Google's AdSense, said Fr. Paolo Padrini, an Internet-savvy priest.

Padrini, who launched the iBreviary prayer app for iPhone last year, will head the ethics committee that will ensure the Catholic values of the platform's ad partners.

"We want to offer highly selected, high-quality, controlled advertisement to the Catholic online world," he said.

Moreover, AdEthic will offer Catholic websites the chance to "monetize" their traffic while supporting charity at the same time, Salvati said.

"There are 13,000 Catholic websites in Italy but they are too small and too fragmented to monetize their online traffic," he said.

Part of AdEthic revenues will be used to fund charitable projects. "We want to turn the concept of advertisement upside down," said Padrini, transforming it from something that "aims exclusively at profit to something that promotes solidarity."

While there are no firm data on traffic to Catholic websites, Salvati estimates that around one-third of Italy's 28 million Internet users visit one of them at least once a month. AdEthic aims to group them together in order to make them a desirable target for advertisers.

AdEthic will start operating in Italy, but aims to eventually expand to other countries. It hopes to attract websites with at least 2 million monthly users to its network by the end of 2012. "We will start selling advertisement space then," Salvati said.

The advertisement platform is part of Aleteia, a Catholic social network that will launch officially on Thursday. Both Aleteia and AdEthics are promoted by the Foundation for Evangelization through the Media, a Rome-based Catholic lay organization that aims to promote faith through social media.

The foundation works in partnership with the Vatican on some media projects, in order to realize Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 call to proclaim the gospel on the "digital continent."

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