

@Pontifex: Follow the Pope on Twitter

The secret's out. Pope Benedict's new handle on Twitter will be @pontifex, beating out other contenders that had been considered to showcase the thoughts of one of the world's most visible leaders.

Benedict already has 1.2 billion "followers" in the standard sense of the word but next week he will have another type when he enters what for any 85-year old is the brave new world of Twitter.

The Vatican said on Monday that the pope will start tweeting on Dec. 12.

"The handle is a good one. It means 'pope' and it also means 'bridge builder'," said Greg Burke, senior media advisor to the Vatican.

Among the other handles that Vatican officials had reportedly considered was @BenedictusPPXVI, but they opted for something that was linked to the office of the papacy.

But don't expect tweets about how the pope is feeling or which soccer team he is praying to win a derby.

The papal tweets will be spiritual, Burke told a news conference, and the pope will tweet when and how often he wants.

And, even though Benedict is not the kind of person who walks around with a Blackberry or iPad, Burke said, "All the pope's tweets are the pope's words. Nobody is going to be putting words into his mouth."

The first papal tweets will be answers to questions sent to #askpontifex.

The tweets will be going out in Spanish, English, Italian, Portuguese, German, Polish, Arabic and French. Other languages will be added in the future.

Primarily the tweets will come from the contents of his weekly general audience, Sunday blessings and homilies on major Church holidays. They will also include reaction to major world events, such as natural disasters.

Benedict will be pushing the button on his first tweet himself on Dec. 12, but in the future most will be written by aides and he will sign off on them.

But while the pope will be one of the world's most high-profile tweeters and have many followers, he will not be following anyone himself.

"This is the new market of ideas and the church has to be there. We want to use any method to spread the message. It's cost-effective and not very labor intensive and it is aimed at young people," Burke said.

Pellets of Wisdom

The Vatican said precautions had been taken to make sure the pope's certified account is not hacked. Only one computer in the Vatican's secretariat of state will be used for the tweets.

Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, head of the Vatican's communications commission, said while he himself was not a big Twitter fan he understood its importance and its possibilities for the church.

"Reducing the pope's message to 140 characters is definitely a challenge, but we have seen that a profound thought can also be expressed in a brief Biblical passage," Celli said. "We can see this as sparks of truth or pellets of wisdom."

And are there any fears that it could create problems with a

type of social media that generates so much discussion?

“I think the risk would be not to go there because you are afraid of going there. Then you would leave vacant a space that is important to spread the pope’s teachings,” said Monsignor Paul Tighe of the Vatican’s communications commission.

The pope’s Twitter page is designed in yellow and white—the colors of the Vatican—with a backdrop of the Vatican and his picture. It may change during different liturgical seasons of the year and when the pope is away from the Vatican on trips.

The pope, who still writes his speeches and books by hand, has given a qualified blessing to social networking.

In a document issued last year, he said the possibilities of new media and social networks offered “a great opportunity,” but warned of the risks of depersonalization, alienation, self-indulgence and the dangers of having more virtual friends than real ones.

In 2009, a new Vatican website, , went live, offering an application called, “The pope meets you on Facebook,” and another allowing the faithful to see the pontiff’s speeches and messages on their iPhones or iPods.

The Vatican famously got egg on its face in 2009 when it was forced to admit that, if it had surfed the Web more, it might have known that a traditionalist bishop whose excommunication was lifted had for years been a Holocaust denier.

(Reporting By Philip Pullella, editing by Paul Casciato)

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