

Pope Gets More Than Half Million Twitter Followers

Even though he hasn't sent a single tweet yet, Pope Benedict had more than half a million Twitter followers in eight languages on Tuesday, the day after the Vatican unveiled his handle: @Pontifex.

They included people ranging from the simple Roman Catholic faithful to a Jewish head of state.

"Your holiness, welcome to Twitter. Our relations with the Vatican are at their best & can form a basis to further peace everywhere," tweeted Israeli President Shimon Peres, who at 89 is four years older than Benedict.

The Vatican said on Monday that Benedict will start tweeting on mostly spiritual topics from December 12.

The pope actually has eight linked Twitter accounts. @Pontifex, the main account, is in English. The other seven have a suffix at the end for the different language versions. For example, the German version is @Pontifex_de, and the Arabic version is @Pontifex_ar.

On Tuesday afternoon, the English version had the most followers, with nearly 400,000. The next largest was Spanish, with some 93,000. The lowest number of followers was the Arabic, with about 3,500. Benedict's native German had about 10,000.

But the pope, leader of some 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, won't be following anyone but himself, the Vatican said.

A look at his official Twitter page on Tuesday showed that he is "following" seven people but they are merely versions of his own Twitter account in different languages.

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.

The tweets will come primarily 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.

He will push the button on his first tweet himself on , but in the future most of the tweets will be written by aides, and he will sign off on them.

The Vatican, whose website has been taken down by hackers in the past, said it has taken precautions 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.

The pope's Twitter page is designed in yellow and white—the colors of the Vatican—and his picture over the backdrop of a St Peter's Square packed with pilgrims.

The page may change during different liturgical seasons of the year and when the pope is away from the Vatican on trips.

© 2012 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.