



VATICAN BLOG MEETING



The November 2010 Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture looked at the diverse languages that must be used in the process of inculturating the Faith and evangelising cultures today. Besides music, architecture, film and literature, the Members and Consultors repeatedly focused their attention on the internet, not just as a tool but also its effects on cultures and languages – a communications revolution is underway changing the way we interact, the way, as a society, we share ideas, talk to each other, influence each other and express ourselves. The moral effects are evident.

Consequently, when the date for the beatification of that great communicator John Paul II was announced it seemed a timely occasion to move that reflection forward. What could the Council do to promote the Church's pastoral engagement with the culture of digital natives, itself in rapid evolution? The reality of the blogosphere seemed like an opportune focal point and rather than produce another message, theological reflection or consultancy exercise, I thought a simple meeting with bloggers would lift the ideas off the page and transform them into reality. It would be an occasion to encounter symbolically those bloggers, Catholic and non, who are not just an alternate source of news, but a society of comments, debate and dialogue, a group of people with joys and hopes, fears and anxieties and their own way of expressing themselves, their own culture. The direct language, seemingly unaccountable style and creative literacy of bloggers, together with some of the less-than-charitable discussions that ensue even in the Catholic blogosphere, represents a culture of effective communication and yet sometimes dysfunctional community. Rather than just listen and learn from bloggers by reading their blogs, a meeting in the flesh would help break down innumerable barriers and misconceptions and overcome diffidence and apparent aloofness.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications (PCCS) was quick to join in preparing the event. Subsequently other Vatican institutions became involved, from the media outlets through to young webmasters of other Dicasteries with an eye to their own communications efforts. The specificity of blogs is that they are "web logs", that is, online diaries reflecting the thoughts and feelings of the author, used partially for publicity, partially to flatter their own egos and sometimes to simply share ideas. Yet their affinity with the social media movements and micro-blogging (telling people what is going on in less than 140 characters, a determining factor in the *Arab Spring Uprising* and an education in being succinct) meant that applications to attend our meeting came not just from bloggers and Church media officials, but also politicians and academics who see this as the tip of an iceberg of an emerging cultural reality. Without even hosting a press conference to give the event publicity, 750 requests to participate were made within a few days, including one from a bishop who blogs. 50 names were chosen to ensure thematic and geographical diversity, and a further 100 names were drawn by lots – it worked for the twelfth apostle,

St Matthias (cf. Acts 1:26). But even such a simple strategy sent some quarters of the blogosphere into hysterics.

The event took place on 2 May in the Aula of Palazzo San Pio X, *via della Conciliazione*, 5. During the first panel chaired by Rocco Palmo (author of the blog *Whispers in the Loggia*), testimonials of the awesome power of blogging and the way it could be harnessed for the new evangelisation were given by Mr Andrés Beltramo, Fr. Roderick Vonhögen, Mr Mattia Marasco, Mrs Elizabeth Scalia and Mr François Jeanne-Beylot. Then, under the moderation of Fr Antonio Spadaro (author of the blog *Cyberteologia.it*) talks were given by Fr Frederic Lombardi, head of Vatican Radio, the Vatican Television Centre and the Holy See's Press Office and by Monsignor Lucio Ruiz of the Internet Office. A presentation of the Church's social media efforts was made by a diocesan webpastor, Fr Marco Sanavio and Miss Eva Janosikova, International Community Manager of the World Youth Day, Madrid 2011. The forthcoming Vatican News Portal designed to meet the needs of the Web 2.0 community was also previewed. The only expenses were the simultaneous translation, a very powerful Wi-Fi connection, the aperitifs, and the hiring of the Hall. The twitter feed (see #vbm11) permitted the virtual presence of a wider audience with some 80.000 tweets being exchanged over the event.

As preparations developed and the event unfolded it became apparent that for the Church there were some recurring issues. Here are some of the issues that were raised:

Isolation, loneliness and independence of bloggers. A priest blogger gave this piece of advice to some of his colleagues attending the event: "Don't turn up in your pyjamas!" As well as being typically humorous, this touches a sincere note, for bloggers the private realm opens directly onto a very public stage. It is not so much the issue of privacy being invaded, but of a transformation of social mores, where what is intimate becomes immediately public without the caressing interactions that a "normal" community provides. What was discussed by pastoral theoreticians commenting on Reality Television a few years ago is now being faced by the bloggers as they write and comment on or at each other, sometimes feeling alone and discouraged in the virtual community. Indeed most of the bloggers who attended were grateful above all for the occasion to actually meet other bloggers, names they had followed, been intimate with for years, to finally shake a hand or give a hug. We watch with interest as webpastors and chaplains to bloggers appear and the development of lay initiatives such as the creation of group blogs, associations and guilds. On this legal note, we should note too the paradox that while some Catholics demanded the Church police the internet, either negatively denouncing abuse or positively encouraging certain sites, many bloggers responded with a resounding "let the bloggers blog" and an appeal to be left alone, with no control, no oversight, and "no approval system from the Church, let alone the Vatican". Wherein moral authority?

A difficult relationship between the institutional media and the milieu of the social media. Bloggers and mainstream media are not bosom buddies: there are, of course, copyright issues and the move to the online entertainment environment has left print media competing for advertising revenue, even befriending bloggers to increase their traffic. A form of snobbery is evident as some view blogging as a form of inferior journalism. But is the ethical code journalists sign up to so different from the common law of bloggers? Is it right that mainstream media (some of it aggressively anti-Catholic) receive advance copy of sensitive material, while major Catholic bloggers are ignored? Especially as their hard-won and independently-sustained credibility puts them in a good place to help pick up the pieces? The cultural transformation in act requires a serious re-thinking of priorities lest policy become an effort to preserve a status quo of vested interests which is no longer able to meet the needs and opportunities of the new culture. An image describes this best: at the meeting accredited photographers were eventually removed from the premises while bloggers remained taking very high quality photographs and uploading them as free material. What, asked one blogger, is the Church's response to the *Creative Commons Licence*?

Disequilibrium when a hierarchical communion meets the bottom-up culture of the blogosphere. Understood as a Ratzingerian intercultural process, inculturation will always challenge old securities. In the real world this is the hard bit: netiquette demands such meetings to be paper-free, but some people stated they felt naked without a printed copy of the programme; blogging mentality is that on the net the kingdom belongs to those that make the most noise, but this sits roughly with the example of humility of our current Pontiff; on the net ideas, projects and events are born and spread by word of mouth and with no fixed goals, leaders and often changing form, but the Church has its protocols, superiors and missionary strategies; out of the confusion, energies and trends will emerge that people are willing to associate themselves to, sustain and support, but mandates to teach theology received after long periods of specific preparation cannot be compared ex equo with the wise words of unapproved bloggers, who maybe have a greater public. These are but some of the issues that were raised through this meeting and the ongoing discussions, which will now be the subject of a period of reflection and study. My belief is that the two cultures are compatible and the resources do exist to move from one culture to another, finding new mooring and anchor points to ensure continuity of the Church's presence.

Finally, a word on the title of the event. Reflecting blog culture we chose not to have a formal title, nor a subtitle, nor a theme, leaving space for others to be creative in their input. We simply used the umbrella heading Vatican Bloggers Meeting, leaving it undecided as to whether it was a meeting of bloggers, with bloggers, for bloggers or on bloggers. At least this way, that mentality of "them" and "us" (we the Church, defenders of the Truth, and they the nasty bloggers) was soon overcome.

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