

# Pope Benedict XVI joins Twitter, plans mobile app

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican unveiled Pope Benedict XVI's Twitter account on Monday (Dec. 3) as it announced a series of new initiatives aimed at raising the church's online profile.

The pope's account, @Pontifex, drew nearly 200,000 followers in the hours after the announcement even though Benedict will not officially start tweeting until Dec. 12. That's when the pope plans to answer questions about faith submitted to him via Twitter through a special hashtag, #askpontifex, set up by the Vatican.

At least initially, the pope's tweets will be related to his official speeches and activities but their scope might be extended in the future, for example in response to natural disasters.

For now, the pope's tweets will contain "pearls of wisdom" from his speeches, said Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, president of the Vatican department for communications, in announcing the Twitter feed at a Vatican press conference.

Also, while the pope will tweet in eight languages, Vatican officials said he won't be "following" other Twitter users. And while the 85-year old pope won't be typing himself, "nobody is going to be putting words into his mouth," said Greg Burke, a former Fox News journalist who is now a senior Vatican adviser for communications.

According to Burke, Benedict will personally approve the content of every tweet. "All words will be the pope's words," he said.

During the press conference, Celli also announced that the Vatican will soon launch a new mobile app for smartphones and will start producing its own e-books.

The app will be submitted to Apple for approval next week and should be available for free on iTunes by year's end.

According to Gustavo Entrala, CEO of the Spanish firm 101 that developed the app together with the Vatican, "The Pope App" will allow Catholics to follow papal Masses and events in real time, and to peek inside the Vatican through webcams. Entrala said an Android version is also in the works.

Even though he is not the type to carry a blackberry in his pocket, Benedict – who still writes in longhand on paper – has pushed the church to embrace new media.

Without explicitly citing Twitter, he wrote in a 2012 message on communications that "concise phrases, often no longer than a verse from the Bible," can convey "profound thoughts."

According to Burke, Twitter is an example of the "new market of ideas."

"The Church has to be there," he said. "We want to use any method to spread the message."

The Internet can also help the pope avoid problems as well as improve his preaching. After the 2009 media scandal over the lifting of the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, Richard Williamson, Benedict urged the world's bishops to make better use of the web. He said the crisis could have been avoided since Williamson's views were widely available online.