

Fox News reporter Greg Burke gets a new assignment: Vatican PR

by [Tim Townsend](#)

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c. 2012 St. Louis Post-Dispatch ST. LOUIS (RNS) Growing up in St. Gabriel the Archangel parish in south St. Louis, Greg Burke was mostly concerned about excursions to the Ted Drewes frozen custard stand.

In his new job as the Vatican's senior communications adviser, Burke, 52, will be counseling Pope Benedict XVI and his closest staff on how to better project the Catholic Church's image to the rest of the world.

"It's going to be challenging and a little scary," Burke said in an interview Sunday from Rome. "This is a huge and important institution with a billion followers. I'm not going to be a powerful guy, but I'll be at the table with people who do have power, and I think my voice will be heard."

Burke, a member of the Opus Dei movement, has been a journalist in Rome since 1988, most recently for Fox News after a stint with Time magazine. For Fox, he has covered Europe and the Middle East for the last decade.

"He's a lay person, from the professional world, who understands how theologians think and shares their faith," said the Rev. John Wauck, a professor at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome and a friend of Burke's. "Plus, he's well respected and genuinely liked by the journalists in Rome."

When Burke was in St. Louis last April to celebrate his father's 90th birthday, he got the first call from the Vatican asking him to join the communications staff. He turned it down. But Vatican officials kept pursuing him.

"How I went from 'no' to 'yes,' I'm not sure it was logical," he said. "I had every reason to believe I'd sign another three-year contract with Fox."

He went to St. Peter's tomb and prayed about the decision. Then he went to St. Paul's tomb and prayed some more.

"It wasn't a lightning bolt," he said. "It was more of a gut feeling."

He hopes the basis of his practice in Opus Dei -- daily Mass, daily prayer -- will help him in his new position, which he knows will be difficult. But, he said, he'll lean on his faith, which tells him, "Whatever you do, don't lose your serenity. Don't lose your joy."

The Vatican's decision to hire an American journalist to help with its message comes at a time when it badly needs the help. Burke will report directly to the pope's chief of staff, Archbishop Angelo Becciu.

"The Vatican needs all the PR advice it can get," said the Rev. Thomas Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. "More importantly, it needs to listen to the PR advice."

Scandals surrounding leaked internal documents and corruption at the Vatican Bank -- to say nothing of the decade-long clergy abuse crisis -- have softened Vatican officials to the idea of outside help.

"The problem is the Vatican tends to make a mistake and then calls in the PR people to explain it away," Reese said. "Greg can help them only if they're willing to listen to him, and willing to have him in the room when the decisions are being made."

Burke grew up in a large Catholic family -- he has five brothers and sisters -- and many of the families from St. Gabriel's spent time at Opus Dei's Wespine Study Center in Kirkwood, Mo. Opus Dei is a conservative, largely lay movement within the Roman Catholic Church that was founded in 1928.

When Burke was 18, and leaving for college at Columbia University in New York, he made a commitment to Opus Dei. He is a "numerary" in the movement, a celibate layman who lives at an Opus Dei center in Rome.

Burke attended St. Louis University High School, where he said he got a great education and a lot of experience around Jesuits. "There were a couple Jesuit Latin teachers -- gentlemen, scholars and maybe even saints," he said. "But I didn't feel the pull of the priesthood."

Instead, after college, he enrolled in Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, and then went to work for a small newspaper called the Daily Item in Port Chester, N.Y., where he covered the police beat. He moved on to Chicago, where he worked for United Press International as a night shift reporter writing national weather stories.

In 1988, he was offered a job as the Rome correspondent for a conservative Catholic weekly newspaper called the National Catholic Register. He moved to Rome at the age of 28 and never left.

"He's an English-language media professional who knows Italy -- the language, the culture, the mindset -- and the Vatican inside out," Wauck said. "This is important because many of the Vatican's difficulties with the media stem from things getting lost in translation. Greg can help prevent that."

While he has high hopes for his new job, Burke is under no impression that he'll turn around the Vatican's press operation quickly.

"I don't have all the answers, and even if I did, enacting change at the Vatican is sort of like steering a supertanker," he said. "I've watched long enough to know that nobody comes in with pistols blazing and turns everything around in a month or a year."