Pope joins tweeting masses with Pontifex handle, sends "pearls of wisdom" on faith

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VATICAN CITY (AP) -- Benedict XVI, the pope known for his hefty volumes of theology, is now trying brevity - spreading the faith through his own Twitter account.

The pontiff will tweet in eight languages starting Dec. 12 using his personal handle (at)Pontifex, responding live to questions about faith during his weekly general audience, the Vatican said Monday.

Questions can be submitted to (hash)askpontifex, and the pope will likely respond to three to five of those sent from around the world, the Vatican's communications adviser Greg Burke told a news conference.

The pope sent his first tweet last year from a Vatican account to launch the Holy See's news information portal, part of efforts to increase the church presence in social media and spread the faith. A personal Twitter account for the 85-year-old Benedict has been the subject of speculation ever since; Monday's news conference was packed in an indication of the interest it has generated.

Within two hours of the announcement of the pope's handle, he had already garnered nearly 60,000 followers.

Burke said the handle (at)Pontifex was chosen because it not only means pope in Latin, but also bridge-builder, suggesting unity. How often will the pope tweet? "As often as he wants," Burke said, adding that he hoped the tweeting would be frequent and regular.

While the pope will push the button himself on Dec. 12, subsequent tweets will be sent by someone in the Vatican's secretariat of state. They will, however, all be approved by the pope, officials said.

"It's always going to have his engagement and his approval," said Monsignor Paul Tighe, the No. 2 in the Vatican's social communications office. "Not physically, but from his mind."

Currently a host of Twitter accounts use the pope's name, purporting to be his personal account. The (at)Pontifex account, however, is certified as the only official papal Twitter feed, Tighe said. No special security arrangements have been taken to prevent the account from being hacked; Burke said Twitter has many celebrity clients.

"They seem to be able to take care of them. We assume they'll be able to take care

of us as well," he said.

Papal tweets will be sent simultaneously in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Polish and Arabic, Burke said. Monsignor Claudio Maria Celli, the president of the Vatican's social communications office, said he hoped to add Chinese.

He stressed that the papal tweets aren't to be considered infallible teachings, merely "pearls of wisdom" in the pope's own words.

The Vatican has been increasing its presence in social media, using YouTube channels and Facebook pages for special events and Twitter to engage believers and nonbelievers alike, particularly the young.

The Vatican decided against using a personal Facebook page for the pope because they thought it was too personal an interaction and would require more manpower to keep updated.

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