

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

# Monsignor PAUL TIGHE

## Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications

**B**orn in Navan, County Meath, Ireland, Monsignor Paul Tighe, (pronounced “tie”), graduated from University College Dublin in 1979 with a BCL degree in law. Having studied for the priesthood in Holy Cross College in Clonliffe and at the Pontifical Irish College in Rome, he was ordained a priest of the Dublin Diocese in 1983. The only religious ever in his family, his first appointment was as parish chaplain and teacher in Ballyfermot. Later he studied Moral Theology at Rome’s Pontifical Gregorian University. From 1990-2007 he was a lecturer in Moral Theology at Dublin’s Mater Dei Institute, where he was appointed Head of the Theology Department in 2000.



In 2004 Monsignor Tighe was named Director of Dublin Diocese’s Communications Office. In November 2007 Pope Benedict XVI appointed him Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

### When did you first sense your vocation?

Growing up in Ireland in the 1960s one couldn’t but be absorbed by a sense of vocation. A religious life was on the horizon for all young Catholics. On the day of my First Communion the sister told us that, if we listened carefully, we’d hear God’s voice telling us what to do with our lives. I must confess I heard no voice. The next day she asked me and my 47 classmates what the voice had said. Everyone aspired to becoming a priest or a nun. Not wanting to be left out, I concurred.

My more adult engagement with a possible vocation came around the age of fifteen or sixteen when I was thinking through what I’d do with my life. My teachers considered me scientific; therefore I was exploring professions like medicine or engineering. Medicine attracted me because I wanted to help others. The decisive moment came when someone I knew well became ill; the sick person and family received huge support from a priest in rebuilding their lives. I became aware that priests are also healers; that the most gratifying lifestyle for me would be to share with others the

good news of the Gospel so I entered a seminary in Dublin at 17. Over the next eight years before ordination, as I studied, I grew evermore convinced that God was calling me to this life.

### What exactly is the Pontifical Council for Social Communications?

I always explain first what we’re not. We’re separate from the Vatican’s press office, which is down *Via della Conciliazione* and publishes a daily *Bulletin*, and from the other media outlets: the newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, Vatican Radio, and the news service *VIS*.

So what are we? Above all we work at the heart of the Church, not just in Rome, but for the Church globally, to promote the importance of communications in the life of the Uni-

versal Church. In some respects we’re pushing an open door because communications has always been at the heart of Church life.

The Council, presided over by Archbishop Celli, helps the hierarchical Universal Church to understand the changes in communications thanks to peer-to-peer “new media” so that we can be at the heart of the new dialog and the new debate that this “new media” constantly generates. My job is to transform policy into reality and administer it.

In the past Church communications came from the center-Rome; the audience was passive. With radio or TV we couldn’t know the audience’s reactions immediately. With “new media” it’s not just one person at the center communicating to everybody. It’s a group of people involved in a conversation that becomes open to everybody. For example, if I write an article which people read and find interesting, they may post it on their Facebook page and share it.

We the Church must convince people that what we’re saying is worth sharing. The Council must invent new ways of capturing people’s attention. In the past we worked on preparing very good texts; texts remain important, but today much of our communication is through video, through sound. The Church possesses enormous riches of music, of art, and heritage. Peer-to-peer “new media” is a challenge, but the Church has priceless resources.

Yes, the Council is based here in Rome, but the Catholic Church

is blessed with an extraordinary network of communicators: press, radio, TV, academics, Church organizations, worldwide. Grass-roots at all levels, the local priest, the parish, Catholic hospitals and schools, the dioceses, are vital to our success in spreading the Word. Here in Rome we’re twenty-fold, but we’re building an enormous network of partners globally. The Council can provide this network with opportunities to meet others doing similar work world round. We organize face-to-face meetings, large congresses, workshops, here in Rome. For example, last October every Bishop’s Conference worldwide sent two or three people who work in the Catholic press to Rome; around 240 people came. The participants ranged from multi-national publishers like *Bayard Presse* in France to a Pakistani lady who alone prints a newsletter for her tiny Catholic community, where some members can’t even read. Our role is building up links between people; the new technologies facilitate our goal.

### What were your qualifications for becoming Secretary?

That I’d been a teacher. All students believe they’ll receive a high exam mark if they can repeat back what the teacher said in class. Correcting my first sets of exams I was horrified at how inaccurately my students had interpreted my lessons. My first instinct was to fail them, but then I realized that the problem was that I’d failed to communicate effectively. I knew what I’d said, but I hadn’t taken sufficiently into account what my students were hearing, that many of my cultural references were lost on them.

That made me realize how essential it is to listen and engage others in dialogue. A dialogue rather than a monologue allows more possibilities for correcting misunderstandings quickly. That’s my conviction and goal.

The Church has been entrusted with a crucial message: proclamation of the Gospel, but we must realize that the people who are listening to us don’t necessarily understand the words we’re using or our points of reference. Communication isn’t just imparting information; it’s about establishing a relationship. The role of the media in the Church is to provide an emotional link, a sense of belonging, of maintaining connections. That explains Facebook’s success.

### Isn’t maintaining connections what “new media” has always done?

Yes, it’s interactive, not passive like traditional media: newspapers, radio, and television. “New media” allows for formal dialogue, but also for the instantaneous monitoring of reactions to a message, the ability to verify if the interlocutor has understood.

### So you’ve remained a teacher, but to a larger and larger audience?

Yes, I started off as a “priest-teacher”, a title I’ve always liked, and to some extent I still am, but now rather than actually teaching I evaluate the process of teaching, seeing how The Church can teach evermore effectively and how we can use the new technologies to do so.

### What “new media” do you use personally?



The homepage of the Vatican’s latest “new media”, up on the web since June 29.

I used to be on “Facebook”, but it was too evasive and time-consuming. I prefer talking to writing, so I regularly use Skype. It allows me to keep in touch with many people worldwide at a very low cost.

### When did the Holy See officially start using the so-called “new media”?

Although some parishes and bishops worldwide had been writing blogs earlier, The Church established its official Vatican site: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) in the mid-to-late 1990s. The Council’s use of the web has grown gradually in response to outside initiatives. Its most successful recent initiative was [www.pope2U.net](http://www.pope2U.net), set up with dynamic and interactive features to promote the World Communications Day 2009 message.

In the first four or five days [www.pope2U.net](http://www.pope2U.net) had almost five million hits. The idea originally was to have it up only for a couple of days. We use it now not as a constantly updated website but to focus on specific events: Christmas, Easter, and World Youth Day. This allows young people who can’t attend to follow some events. It also allows people who do attend to send messages and share the events with their friends who aren’t there.

Around the same time Vatican Radio began to use “Twitter” to engage people and alert them of breaking news here in the Vatican. Then to promote the Beatification of John Paul II the Council set up a Facebook page. In developing it we learned from the experience of the British bishops who’d used Facebook very powerfully to

promote the Pope’s 2010 visit. Often the initial experimentation using “new media” takes place at a local level. Afterwards successful local methods help us here in the Vatican to follow suit.

### Are there any new projects?

At the end of June we launched [www.news.va](http://www.news.va). As I said earlier, in the Vatican we already had a daily newspaper, a radio which broadcasts in 40 languages, the press office’s bulletins, *VIS*, and *Fides*, a missionary news agency. However, unless you’re a Vatican expert or insider, it’s difficult to access all this information. The [www.news.va](http://www.news.va) site is essentially a multi-media portal which brings together the news generated by all the different Vatican agencies and organizes it thematically. It focuses primarily on the pope. It also has a section on the Curia, one on the Church worldwide, and some breaking world news accompanied by Church reflections. The site has English and Italian versions; later we’ll expand to Spanish, French, German and Portuguese.

There are two ways the Church can communicate. One is making our statements and then relying on the world media to report them to a wider audience. The other is to give information directly to our own believers in a way that they too can share it.

I’m reading a new American book: *The Church and New Media: Blogging Converts, Online Activists and Bishops Who Tweet* written by Brandon Vogt and published by *Our Sunday Visitor*. Vogt examines all sorts of “new media” initiatives by American Catholics; one chapter is devoted to people who were converted to Catholicism by “new media”. ○