

## Catholics get their own social network



I took part in last week's launch of the much-anticipated "Catholic social networking site" Aleteia. The event took place at a bookshop a stone's throw away from the Vatican – a far cry from the original venue announced for the event, the HQ of Vatican Radio.

But the last minute change – and the withdrawal from the speakers' panel of Msgr. Claudio Maria Celli, head of the Holy See's department for communications – doesn't mean that the project doesn't curry favor at the Vatican. Rather, it seems to be a consequence of some preview stories in American Catholic media that presented it as a brainchild of the Vatican itself.

In fact, Aleteia is promoted by the Foundation for Evangelization through the Media, a lay, Rome-based organization created by Jesus Colina, who founded the Zenit news agency before falling out with the Legionaries of Christ, its owners, about one year ago.

The Foundation is also behind H20 news, a video-news service about the Vatican, and other initiatives aimed at translating into reality Pope Benedict's appeal to evangelize in the "digital continent." It has partnerships with some Vatican departments, including the Pontifical Council of Culture.

Truth be told, there's been quite a buzz about Aleteia in Catholic circles recently, and I was quite curious last Thursday. The project has been around, in a limited format, for a while. But it was hard to pin down what exactly the whole thing would have been about.

After the presentation, and toying around for a while with the 'beta' site that was unveiled on September 20, I can say I have a bit of a clearer picture – and a few lingering questions.

At the presentation, the promoters said Aleteia wants to be a “multiplier,” a “megaphone” for quality Catholic content around the web. It is aimed at all those who are “seekers of the truth.” This is particularly evident in the “Questions” part of the site, where people can ask questions on a spiritual or doctrinal subject, read Aleteia’s editorial team answers, and follow the debate that – supposedly – ensues.

There’s also a “News” section, where Aleteia picks and publishes the best of the crop from the news on Catholicism and the Church (it is actively looking for partners in this and says it has already signed up 1,000 news organization – though some people at the press event were quite surprised when they saw their company’s logo up in the Aleteia presentation). These news items can then be commented on or shared through a handy “fishit” button – a button just like the “Like” button on Facebook that instantly shares the story on all social media. Handy.

Then there are “Video” and “Documents” sections that host, you guessed it, videos and key Vatican and Church documents.

Aleteia is in fact a quite ambitious project. The site is slick, something that you do not see often in Italy-based Catholic projects, it supports six languages and hopes to open a Chinese version eventually. It employs dozens of people in Rome, Paris and Washington.

Its aim, to be the center of a vibrant, grounded in reality and yet Catholically sound debate, is definitely something timely. Anyone who has visited the comments section of an online story about the Church will know that they are alternately dominated by those who rant against all priests as pedophiles and Nazis, and those who long for the time when the Pope was at the head of an actual army to conquer infidels and women’s main occupation outside of the home was to recite rosaries in the church.

In this sense, the “Questions” section could actually be a truly precious tool to help those who are “seeking for the truth” online.

But the site’s vast resources and goals – it even tapped a former Google Italy top manager as CEO – raises in fact my first question: Will it be profitable enough to survive?

Aleteia says it doesn't want to rely on donors and aims to reach breakeven in four years, mostly through the sister advertisement project AdEthic. But during the presentation, a reference was made to a bond-emission scheme. Unfortunately, the minutely written PowerPoint slide detailing it just briefly flashed on the screens and now it is now nowhere to be found on the site. That would be something worth knowing more about.

For now, there doesn't seem to be much of a debate going yet. But the site was just properly rolled out a few days ago and it takes time to develop a user base. Still, it doesn't seem to me, at least at this time, that there is the possibility to actually share content. You either ask questions in the appropriate section or comment on the selected news.

Aleteia explained that a group of around 40 people around the world and a high-level "editorial committee" will vet the news stories and the content that goes on the site, in order to make sure that its Catholicity is preserved. After all, they say, the aim is to work for the Church and spread its message, so there needs to be some oversight.

But will the hard questions – those that many Catholics around the world ask themselves and doubt upon – receive more than a perfunctory answer? Who will vet what stories go on the site? Will the disquieting, hard-hitting news about scandals, sex abuse and so on be allowed on it? What will be the limits to the discussion in order to maintain its Catholicity?

This, I think, is the key point upon which the whole project's credibility – and success – will hang. If real, nuanced, complex debate will find its home there – tempered with a constant reference to the texts and with an oversight on verbal excess and plain ignorance – it will be something that the Church sorely needs, and that will thrive because of this need.

I can only wish it luck.

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