

Misinterpreting Catholicism

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How media coverage distorts public understanding of the Church

Are major media outlets biased against the Catholic Church? That question has been debated for years. By now anyone who has not recognized the problem is not likely to be convinced.

But even without any conscious hostility toward the Church, the media can—and do—frequently guide their readers astray. Few secular reporters today are familiar with even the most fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church. When reporters do not understand their own subjects properly, they are prone to error, vulnerable to manipulation, and likely to pass along their own confusion.

As the founder and editor of Catholic World News, Philip F. Lawler has been providing daily coverage of Church-related stories since 1996. With 30 years of background in Catholic journalism, he has a keen understanding of how media coverage shapes the public perception of the Church.

In this book Lawler dissects secular news coverage, showing how journalists mislead their audiences as a result of bias, ignorance, or both.

Misinterpreting Catholicism

How media coverage distorts public
understanding of the Church

by Philip F. Lawler

Commentary by veteran news editor Philip F. Lawler on the misunderstanding of, and
bias against, the Catholic Church persistent in today's media.

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Introduction

September 09, 2011

Every weekday morning I begin my day's work by reading dozens of news stories about the Catholic Church: primarily stories carried by secular news outlets. Sometimes that exercise is depressing; sometimes it is hilarious. More often than not, the secular media provide only partial coverage of Church-oriented stories, because more often than not the reporters covering those stories have only a partial understanding of Catholicism. Consequently, anyone who relies on the secular media for his news about the Church will have a warped understanding of Catholic life today.

Is the media biased against the Catholic Church? The question has been debated for decades now, and the argument has been presented in detail, again and again. By now, anyone who does not already acknowledge the existence of anti-Catholic bias is unlikely to be convinced by one more presentation of the evidence.

This book, however, is not dedicated to the argument that reporters and editors are hostile to Catholicism. Animosity toward the faith can certainly result in biased coverage, of which there are several illustrations in this volume. But even without any conscious hostility, the media can—and frequently do—offer distorted reports for either one of two reasons.

First, reporters who do not understand the Church often give only a partial, misleading presentation of Catholic affairs. Their editors, equally ignorant on the subject, fail to correct them. Reporters can be misled by critics of the Church (often, alas, critics who portray themselves as faithful Catholics), who present their opinions as facts. They can be misguided themselves, by misconceptions about Catholic belief that they picked up in childhood, or in college courses taught by professors suffering from outright bias or the same sort of ignorance. Thus they can perpetuate errors, making them even more widespread.

Second, reporters can simply ignore potential stories that would be of special interest to Catholic readers, or to non-Catholics who take an interest in Catholic affairs. Journalists quite naturally pay attention to the developments that are most interesting to them, to their editors, to their friends and acquaintances. If they live in a secularized society, surrounded by people who have no interest in religious affairs, they may be completely unaware of stories that would be keenly interesting to religious readers. Thus

for example journalists might know nothing about the latest developments within the local pro-life movement, or among home-schooling families—not necessarily because they harbor a bias against those groups, but because they rarely interact with the people involved.

When reporters are blatantly biased, discerning readers can learn to recognize the editorial slant, adjust appropriately, and come away from a news story with at least a rudimentary idea of what actually happened. Consider how athletic events are covered in newspapers that make no pretense of objectivity in their sports pages. If you read about the Ohio State-Michigan football game in the Ohio State campus newspaper, you will be given a cheerfully partisan view; the reporter's judgments about the game's heroes and villains will be very different from those found in the Michigan student newspaper. But you, as the reader, can probably judge for yourself which players on both teams were most impressive. At the very least, you will know the final score.

But suppose you were looking in those same campus papers for the latest news about your hometown softball league. You would see nothing. The most exciting game in the history of that league might have been played during the past week, but you would not know about it.

And now imagine that the game coverage in that student newspaper was provided by a reporter who had never before attended a football game, and hadn't bothered to learn about the sport. Imagine that the story was littered with errors and malapropisms—with references to players who had "hit a home run" and referees who had called penalties for "hand ball" or "hooking." Imagine that the reporter did not understand the system of scoring in football, and wasn't clear about the game's final outcome.

You probably have trouble even imagining such incompetence, because of course it would never happen. No editor would ever rely on a reporter who did not understand football to cover a big game. And yet, even at major urban news dailies, editors routinely assign stories on religious affairs to reporters who have no understanding of the subject. The results can be every bit as ugly, and as bewildering to readers.

A reporter's incompetence can be every bit as damaging to the reader's understanding as a blatant bias. A reader who is given the facts together with a liberal dose of the reporter's own opinions may have a better grasp on the truth than one who receives only a few half-digested facts. To say that media coverage of Catholic affairs often gives a skewed picture of the Church does not necessarily imply that journalists are malicious. Ignorance can be even more damaging.

A good journalist provides his audience with not only the essential facts about a story, but also with the relevant context. Obviously, a reporter who does not know the

field cannot provide the context. Such a reporter can easily be misguided by partisan sources who offer their own “context” in pre-packaged story, neatly designed to advance some special interest. Once again, without any hostile intent on his own part, the reporter can produce a very inaccurate perspective.

Again, since my regular work involves reading dozens of stories about Catholic affairs, I see the evidence of media bias on a daily basis. My task as editor of Catholic World News is to give readers an accurate understanding of events that affect the Church. Often that work entails correcting the popular errors and misconceptions arise from mainstream media coverage. In this book I have collected some of the corrections, complaints, and warnings that I have posted in the past several years. I hope thereby to give readers some practice in detecting when media bias is at work, and knowing how to cope with it.

All of the comments that appear in this book were originally posted on the Catholic Culture site. Most of them involve news stories that were in the headlines at that time. In order to preserve the flavor of day-to-day commentary, I have not altered the time references. Each chapter is marked with the date of its original appearance, so that interested readers can refer back to the news of that day for further amplification on the details of the news stories.

After two overview pieces, on the need for a distinctively Catholic approach to the news and the common sins of editorial omission, this book is divided into seven parts:

Part I: What journalists don't know

When reporters do not understand stories, or do not deem them important, the results can range from frustrating to comical. At times a secular reporter will “discover” a news development a week or more after it has been reported in the Catholic media. On the other hand, there are times when secular reporters pick up stories from Catholic World News, demonstrating the value of our news coverage.

In this opening section I comment on some of the more flagrant examples of journalistic ignorance about Catholic—and more broadly religious—affairs. There is the Australian reporter who blames problems on the Bishop of Rome, but doesn't seem to know that the Bishop of Rome is the Pope. A BBC story informs us that “Jewish theology” prohibits murder—as if the ban on killing were some recondite theological point that only Jews would understand. The *Washington Post* offers a view on Catholic-Anglican affairs so thoroughly misinformed that I cannot unravel the confusion. An *ABC Nightline* documentary discovers controversy where no controversy exists. A Minnesota newspaper botches a story on indulgences, and demonstrates in the

process that it does not understand the very nature of the Church. And from Florida comes a story that perpetuates an old canard about Catholic belief regarding the Eucharist. Part I also includes my commentary on an opinion column by one writer who should know better: a professor who “dumbs down” the understanding of Catholic teaching—deliberately, one suspects—in order to score his own partisan points.

Reporters often cite “Vatican sources” or “Church officials” to confirm news stories. Such citations should be handled with extreme caution. There are quite a few people working at the Vatican; few of them can speak with any authority about Church policies. The old adage is worth remembering: “Those who know, don’t talk; those who talk, don’t know.” And sometimes “those who talk” are inflating their own importance—or having their importance exaggerated by sympathetic friends—in order to convey the appearance of an authority they do not possess.

I close Part I with my reflections on an unusual story. It was a story that involved Catholic affairs, and won wide coverage in the secular media. Yet I was reluctant to give the story any coverage at all, and I explain why.

Part II: When Bias Is Blatant

Part II covers the more conventional aspects of media bias: the stories in which some—an editor, a reporter, or a news source—clearly intends to criticize Church teachings.

Even here, however, ignorance can play a role. Every year, as Easter approaches, the “Jesus Seminar” comes up with some new attempt to debunk the Gospel accounts. When radical theologians advance new theories about the “real” teachings of Christ, most journalists are not equipped to find the flaws in their arguments, or even to recognize when they are new versions of tired old theories that lost their intellectual luster a few centuries ago.

Part II includes my analysis of two clearly hostile columns about Catholic affairs. One is by a prominent columnist who objected to the beatification of Pope John Paul II, apparently because the Polish Pontiff did not advance his (the columnist’s) preferred views. The other comes from a deservedly obscure outlet, which takes editorial bias to new heights with the argument that the Catholic Church “would rather let you die than use a condom.”

If reporters are out of their depth, and their sources are biased, the results are the same as they would be if the reporters themselves deliberately distorted the facts. Unfortunately, sometimes these biased perspectives come from people who are employed by bishops; in those cases, the reporters’ confusion is understandable.

Part III: When the Media Choose Sides

When controversies arise within the Catholic Church—and they arise frequently—liberal journalists are quick to embrace the cause of liberal Catholics. In fact the nastiest criticism of the Church comes from commentators who identify themselves as Catholics, while rejecting fundamental Church doctrines. One of the most influential figures in American journalism describes himself not as a lapsed Catholic but as a “collapsed Catholic,” suggesting a new level of alienation. Yet he continues to comment on Church affairs, still claiming that his perspective comes from *inside* the Church from which he is so thoroughly estranged.

If journalists followed their ordinary standards for reporting, they would quickly recognize that the women who claim to have been ordained as Catholic priests are not really Catholic, and/or not really priests. But the secular media regularly defer to these women, accepting the priestesses’ claims even when all the available evidence weighs against them.

In similar fashion, reporters pounced enthusiastically on the report that Pope Benedict XVI had endorsed the use of condoms as a defense against AIDS, since a handful of self-identified Catholics placed that interpretation on a much-misunderstood papal statement. A sympathetic report on the notoriously liberal Jesuit order conveyed the curious message that the spectacular decline in the number of Jesuit recruits is testimony to the vigor of the order, rather than its self-destructive impulse. And when an Arizona bishop disciplined a Catholic hospital for allowing an abortion, reporters deferred entirely to the hospital administrators—not only on questions of medical practice, but even on questions of theology and canon law.

Part IV: None So Blind

What would happen if 100,000 people or more gathered in Washington for a public demonstration, and the major media outlets did not cover it? That’s what happens each January with the March for Life. The mainstream media ignore the pro-life movement but consistently downplay pro-life arguments, so that a report on China’s brutal “one-child” population policy can completely overlook the cost in human lives, and reporters covering political and legal issues can be consistently surprised by the fact that the abortion issue has not yet disappeared. Sometimes journalists give the impression that their own view of the world verges on solipsism: they are slow to recognize that an idea or movement continues to exist, even if they cease to pay attention. This can apply even to basic scientific realities; the *New York Times* is ready to make the preposterous

argument that abstinence causes pregnancy, since the more conventional explanation for pregnancy is a taboo subject.

Reporters who were not paying careful attention failed to notice when then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited the Vatican and received an icy reception. Vatican officials were sending a message to American Catholics, but that message was not received, because most American Catholics never heard the story.

Journalists were quite happy, on the other hand, to publicize Pope Benedict's statements on the need to protect the environment. Still, in their coverage the media did not notice that the views expressed by the "Green Pope" were quite different from those of other environmentalists. Reporters also found it newsworthy when Pope Benedict met with artists to encourage their work. Most accounts of that meeting managed to suggest that it is somehow unusual for the Vatican to sponsor artistic endeavors: an idea that would come as a surprise to Michelangelo, Palestrina, and countless others.

This section of the book again ends with an offbeat item: a human-interest story that few media outlets noticed, but I find fascinating. It's a story about the evening when Pope Benedict reportedly stole out of the Vatican for dinner at his favorite restaurant. Is it true? I don't know; no one will confirm it. But I hope so.

Part V: A Story Becomes an Obsession

For the past decade, media coverage of the Catholic Church has been dominated by stories on the sex-abuse scandal. That story has been characterized by the same problems that appear in all other coverage of Catholic affairs, and since the volume of stories on the scandal has been much greater, so too has the amount of misinformation.

The beatification of Pope John Paul II, which should have been such a time of celebration for the universal Church, saw a spate of stories suggesting that the late Pontiff had handled the sex-abuse scandal poorly. There are legitimate questions that could be asked about how Blessed John Paul responded to complaints about abusive priests—and, perhaps more importantly, about bishops who failed to discipline those priests. But was this the appropriate time to ask those questions? Reporters who had never questioned the late Pontiff's actions while he was alive suddenly turned to the story. Why? Because the sex-abuse story had become the *only* story about the Catholic Church that the media considered important, and the Vatican had become the primary target for criticism.

During the year 2010, critics of the Church mounted an aggressive worldwide campaign to persuade the public that the Vatican was ultimately responsible for the entire sex-abuse scandal. The facts did not support that criticism, but reporters covering

the story were often unacquainted with the facts, and the Vatican's critics were offering only their own special perspective. At its peak, the publicity campaign against the Vatican culminated with an attack on Pope Benedict, designed to convey the impression that he had sought to cover up evidence of abuse—when in fact the Pope had worked energetically to root out the corruption.

Part VI: Sniping at the Pope

Criticism of the Roman Pontiff is always a popular pastime, and Pope Benedict XVI—who was a controversial public figure for years before his election to St. Peter's Throne—has been a special target. Some reporters take great pains to remind readers of the Pope's advanced age; others never miss an opportunity to mention his youth in Hitler's Germany.

When the Pope makes a statement that offends modern liberal sensibilities, he is vilified. His opponents do their best not to answer the Pope's arguments, but to silence his voice. However, even his harshest critics are willing to wrench his statements out of context, when possible, and invoke the Pope's moral authority to advance their own causes. Finally, when the Pope makes an important public statement that catches listeners by surprise, there are always commentators ready to complain about what he did *not* say. **Part**

VII: With friends like these

In an ideal world, popular misconceptions about the Catholic Church would not survive for long; the damage done by the secular media would promptly be repaired by the work of strong Catholic outlets. Unfortunately, few Catholic outlets today have the clout necessary to counteract the influence of the mainstream media giants. And to make matters worse, the most visible of all Catholic media outlets—the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*—sometimes exacerbates the problem.

Under new editorial management, *L'Osservatore Romano* has caught the attention of the secular media with its sympathetic treatment of entertainment icons like Michael Jackson and the Beatles. But in the process the Vatican newspaper has trivialized its own message. On more serious matters, *L'Osservatore* has demonstrated a sad inability to recognize the fault lines in the American political system, leading the paper into an ill-advised defense of President Obama against his pro-life critics. And on one memorable occasion, at the release of a book-length interview with Pope Benedict, the editorial treatment by *L'Osservatore Romano* seriously undercut the Pope's own message on a highly controversial topic. That inexplicable gaffe led me to suggest that

the editor should resign.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=836>

How to keep the media honest in coverage of the Church

June 18, 2010

In troubled times, the news is more important than ever. And we live in troubled times—especially for the Catholic Church.

Think about it: Sometimes reading the paper or watching the newscast is a form of entertainment. (Who's pitching for the local team tonight?) Sometimes it's a spectator sport in itself. (Which Hollywood stars were divorced this week?) But often it's a deadly earnest activity. We follow the latest reports about a tense standoff in Korea, or a growing oil spill in the Gulf, or an economic crisis in Greece, knowing that any one of those crises could have a profound effect on our own lives.

The incessant pounding of criticism directed against the Catholic Church in the past few weeks has already had a damaging effect on the lives of the faithful. How many people have left the Church in disgust, influenced by stories that suggest the entire Church is guilty for the misconduct of a few? How many lukewarm Catholics have fallen into the error of assuming that, if the media carry stories day after day hinting that the Pope is orchestrating a massive cover-up of sexual abuse, the charges must be true? How many bishops and priests have held their tongues, fearful of speaking out about some important moral issue, because they fear the inevitable, scornful reply: that an institution that coddles child-molesters has no standing to teach morality?

The teaching function of the Church is suffering because Church leaders have lost credibility. The sanctifying function of the Church is suffering because so many Catholics are drifting away from the faith. The governing function of the Church is suffering because dissident groups are exploiting the crisis to promote their own ideas of "reform," looking to dismantle the structures of ecclesiastical discipline. And all this damage is aggravated by the pounding drumbeat of adverse publicity in the media, which keeps the Church on the defensive and impedes real apostolic activity.

Please do not misunderstand the purpose of this column. This is not just one more complaint about media bias against Catholicism, nor is it a plea for silence about the very real misconduct of some Catholic bishops and priests. The media did the Church a great service by forcing the hierarchy to acknowledge the cancerous reality of sexual abuse. I

personally have been arguing for more than 20 years for a candid response to the abuse crisis: an end to the cover-up. I applaud reporters who handle this delicate issue honestly and accurately.

However, media coverage—of this story or any other—is helpful only if it is timely and accurate. In the “Long Lent” of 2002, as the details of the sex-abuse scandal in the United States emerged in the media, the coverage was often tinged with sensationalism, but in general it was accurate and certainly it was timely. This year’s coverage, prompted by new revelations in Europe, has been neither accurate nor timely, but consistently misleading.

Let me illustrate my point with a couple of homely examples. If you check the weather report, do you want *today’s* forecast, or will you settle for one that is two or three days old? You want today’s forecast, of course. Why? Because the forecast will help you decide what to wear, and whether or not to plan outdoor activities. You will make decisions and take actions based on the news you receive.

Weather forecasts, unfortunately, are sometimes inaccurate. So let me take another case. If you have an investment portfolio, when you check the stock prices, you want the latest quotes, not those from a week ago. At least equally important, you want accurate price quotes. Again, based on the information you receive you may make decisions: to buy or sell your shares.

Well, today thousands of Catholics are making decisions: whether or not they can trust their bishops; whether or not they will bother to go to Mass this Sunday. Those decisions will be influenced by the information they receive from the media.

For most secular media outlets, religious news is not a high priority. Religious stories are often handled by inexperienced reporters, and shunted off to the back pages of the newspaper or the final minutes of the evening broadcast. Many newspapers confine religious affairs to a single weekly column—sometimes with downright humorous results. I recently spotted an item in one such weekly column, announcing that a bishop had “reportedly” been murdered in Turkey; that item was published on the day of Bishop Padovese’s funeral, several days after his assailant had confessed to stabbing him. It was an old story, dressed up as a fresh new report.

Unfortunately, that is not the only old story that has been given new life by recent media reports. The past few weeks have seen exhaustive front-page coverage, in some of America’s most widely circulated journals, of stories that had first emerged more than a decade ago. These stories were revived not because any important new information had been unearthed, but because editors found them newly marketable, in a climate of general distrust for the Church. The old stories were sent back out onto the media market in shiny

new packages.

All too often the packaging included some deceptive advertising as well. Time and again the major media have carried stories based on ignorance or misunderstanding of the way the Church works.

In 1996, when I launched Catholic World News, my editorial goals were based on two strong beliefs:

First, I believed that loyal Catholics need reliable information about world affairs as seen from a Catholic perspective—and that this distinct perspective would be even more important as the “culture wars” continued and the Church became more involved in public controversies.

Second, I believed that a Catholic news service would be more credible, in the eyes of the world, if it remained independent from all ecclesiastical control. No one should ever suspect that CWN was carrying a story—or, more ominous, covering up a story—on orders from some chancery office

Through the years, CWN has built up a reputation for accurate, timely reporting on Catholic affairs. While it hasn't been easy to build up our news coverage, the investment of time and treasure has begun to pay dividends. Our coverage doesn't just inform CWN readers; it informs the mass media as well.

Several times in the past few weeks, I've noticed that large secular outlets reported a story in language remarkably close to the language of CWN stories, and explained things the way CWN explained them. More than once, a major outlet has quietly corrected an inaccurate story after CWN called attention to errors. The presence of an independent Catholic outlet helps to keep the other secular outlets honest.

Yet I should not leave the impression that all contact between CWN and the major media outlets is adversarial. On the contrary, every week I can expect a few calls from secular reporters who want some background information, some off-the-record guidance, some help in understanding the latest developments in Rome. Some interview requests are more formal. This past Monday, by 11 in the morning I had been interviewed by 5 different radio stations about the Pope's homily for the closing Mass of the Year for Priests. That was an exceptionally busy day, to be sure, but it was also in indication of how widely the influence of the CWN news coverage can spread across the media world.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=446>

What the media don't notice

November 25, 2008

The American Papist blog, which is always worth checking, notes the Pew Forum report on the under-reporting of religious affairs during the presidential campaign. “No kidding,” [The Papist drily observes](#). Then, noticing how little attention was paid (outside the Catholic blogosphere) to Joe Biden’s problems with his Catholic Church, the Papist comments:

Remember, under-reporting is a form of media bias as well.

Exactly.

As you read a news story, you can often detect the reporter’s bias. If you’re a discerning reader you can adjust for that bias, and come away with a reasonably accurate idea of what has actually happened. But what if there is no bias—because there is no story? You can’t form *any* opinion on current events if you don’t know that the events occurred.

That’s one important reason for the existence of a service like Catholic World News. We carry stories that are of interest to Catholic readers. In the eyes of secular news editors these stories may seem unimportant, unworthy of coverage. We have a different perspective.

There are times, too, when secular reporters catch on a bit later. They aren’t paying attention to news of the Church, so they don’t notice things when they first happen. But a few days later they suddenly get the drift. So, for example, when I scanned the headlines this (Tuesday) morning, I saw quite a few stories about the editorial on the Beatles in *L’Osservatore Romano*. CWN [carried that story yesterday](#), but only because we don’t post a weekend edition; the editorial appeared last Saturday. There were also several new headlines about the threatened excommunication of Father Roy Bourgeois. CWN ran [that story](#) 12 days ago, but loyal readers will recall that we predicted the showdown [back in August](#).

I don’t mean to brag. A Catholic news service will naturally provide better coverage of Church affairs than a secular outlet, just as the business section of your daily paper gives more information about financial affairs than the front page. But I think the point is worth stressing, because if you’re a serious investor you need that information about the stock markets, and if you’re a serious Catholic in today’s world, I suggest that you

need reliable news of world events from a Catholic perspective.

Many CWN readers have expressed astonishment that so many Catholics voted for Barack Obama, in light of Obama's stance on abortion. But how many of those Catholic voters were familiar with Obama's stand on abortion? That topic didn't come up frequently during the presidential campaign—as that [Pew Forum study](#) showed.

So now we're back where we started. If you don't know the facts, you can't have an intelligent opinion about them. If the facts aren't reported, you can't know the facts.

Remember, under-reporting is a form of media bias as well.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=312>

Part I: What Journalists Don't Know

Time lags in the news cycles

November 03, 2009

It's a frustrating business to watch the coverage of Catholic issues in the secular media. Every weekday we comb through the headlines, looking for new stories. More often than not we find old stories as well.

This week, for example, we're noticing quite a few headline stories in the secular media about the reactions to the Pope's invitation to Anglicans—the sort of stories we were featuring on CWN last week, or maybe even the week before that.

Today several newspapers carried stories suggesting that the delay in the Pope's apostolic constitution might be attributable to arguments over priestly celibacy: [the story we featured last Thursday](#). Since that time there have been two new developments: on Saturday the Vatican [issued a statement denying a conflict on celibacy](#), and yesterday in [our report on that denial](#) CWN pointed out that the Vatican's official denial still suggested that the celibacy issue is unresolved. So the headlines that we're spotting today are two developments out of date—two news cycles behind the story. We can probably expect these newspapers to catch up with today's news by the coming weekend—when, in all probability, we'll already be a few more steps down the road.

Why are the secular media so frequently late with their coverage of Catholic stories? It's simple: they aren't paying attention. They rely on Catholic outlets to alert them. So if an event occurs on Monday, the Catholic news media prepare their stories on Tuesday, the secular reporters notice them on Wednesday, and the “news”—which is now anything but new—appears in the secular outlets on Thursday and Friday. And if secular reporters are waiting for the diocesan newspapers, which only appear weekly,...

In some cases, by the time the story appears in the secular media, the original event has receded into the past, leaving no trace. Occasionally CWN receives a complaint from a reader who wonders why we haven't covered a story that's prominently displayed in the week's headlines—and learns that we actually did cover it a week earlier. In a somewhat more serious case, last week [several British publications offered a distorted account of an article in L'Osservatore Romano about Halloween celebrations](#), and by the time those sensational accounts were in circulation, the original piece in the Vatican newspaper was no longer readily accessible online, so interested readers could not easily correct the popular misunderstandings.

It's gratifying to know that other media outlets watch our coverage and often take our leads. But it's frustrating to realize that many Catholic readers still receive most of their news about Catholic affairs through the secular media—that is, second-hand. That coverage is often delayed and distorted. Could you do something to ease my frustration? If your friends, neighbors, and relatives are interested in Catholic news, tell them to come here, and get it while it's still fresh.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=533>

Another vivid illustration of the need for reliable sources of Catholic news

December 01, 2008

In Brisbane, Australia, Archbishop John Bathersby is nearing a showdown with a dissident parish community. What are the facts? *The Australian* offers one version:

Church liberals believe the Vatican is under pressure to close St Mary's by members of the ultra-conservative Opus Dei grouping, which is close to Cardinal Pell and Rome's influential bishop, Javier Echevarria.

What a lovely little conspiracy theory! It's Archbishop Bathersby who has called St. Mary's parish to account, yet *The Australian* takes it for granted that dark forces at the Vatican are involved, and forges ahead from that starting point to suggest that other darker forces are manipulating the Vatican: certainly Opus Dei (which is a "grouping"—nice journalistic precision there) and possibly the Elders of Sion. If you were reading a suspense thriller, this would be great stuff. But since *The Australian* is supposed to function as a *newspaper*, you might wonder how accurate it all is—particularly in light of the final phrase.

It's true that Javier Echevarria is a bishop, and he does live in Rome. But he's not the Bishop of Rome; he's the prelate of Opus Dei.

Rome does, indeed, have an "influential bishop." His name—for the benefit of any *Australian* editors who might be reading this note—is Benedict XVI.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=313>

The religious illiteracy of secular reporting

January 13, 2011

Just when you think that reporters in the mainstream media couldn't possibly show any more ignorance about religion, along comes a story to prove you wrong. This time it is the oh-so-respectable BBC. In an [otherwise unenlightening commentary](#) on Sarah Palin's use of the term "blood libel," the BBC solemnly informs us:

Blood libel myths run counter to Jewish theology which prohibits murder.

Yes, it's true—and not exactly surprising—that the Jewish faith condemns murder. But somehow the BBC report conveys the impression that the Jewish condemnation of murder arises from some arcane theological point, which we readers cannot be expected to be aware of, much less to understand.

In fact, anyone who knows anything about Judaism knows why the faith condemns murder. The phrase "Thou shalt not kill" rings a bell, doesn't it? Yet the story suggests that the BBC reporter doesn't expect his readers to be familiar with the Decalogue—perhaps because he isn't familiar with it himself.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=753>

Out of their depth

November 10, 2009

Was it only [last week that I commented](#) on how the secular media tend to lag behind—by one, two, or more news cycles—in their coverage of events within the Catholic Church? And that’s if they ever get the story right at all.

My thanks to the Washington Post for providing a vivid illustration of my point with this item from a [weekly roundup](#):

Anglican archbishop to meet with pope

Two developments arose after the Catholic Church’s surprising overtures last month to Anglicans.

First, the Vatican has confirmed that Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual leader of the world’s Anglicans, will meet Pope Benedict XVI on Nov. 21.

The second development is a clarification issued by Catholic leaders about how the conversion of married Anglican priests will mesh with the Catholic tradition of celibate priest. Catholic leaders issued a clarification that essentially says only current Anglican priests and seminarians will be allowed to become Catholic priests.

Yes, the Pope will meet with the Archbishop of Canterbury later this month. That appointment has been scheduled for weeks; it is not news, nor is it (as this report would suggest) a response to the Pope’s apostolic exhortation.

The second “development,” as reported by the *Post*, is too muddled to allow for careful analysis. But insofar as it makes sense, it’s wrong. Did the author really intend to say that only Anglicans currently in the priestly pipeline will be allowed to enter the Catholic priesthood? That’s not true. Or did he omit the crucial word “married,” and he really intended to say that the married Anglican priests and seminarians of today could be admitted to the Catholic clergy, but none could follow in the future? That would make more sense, but it would be inaccurate. In other words, a skilled editor could, with a little work, make the paragraph grammatical and even logical, but it still wouldn’t be true.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=539>

So where's the controversy?

July 15, 2011

Here's a hot tip on reading (or watching) the news: If a reporter claims that many people hold a certain opinion, but cannot cite any examples, be suspicious.

If the newspaper story says that "some people believe" Proposition A, he should be able to quote someone who holds that belief, or at least point you toward the group of believers. If he doesn't—and you can't readily identify the believers yourself—you might legitimately suspect that the reporter is inserting his own beliefs into the story. Similarly, if the campaign reporter tells you that Political Candidate A has been criticized for taking Position Y, the story should supply quotes from the critics. If it doesn't, the prudent reader is suspicious.

There are times when even a good reporter does not feel the need to spell out all the details of a story. If I tell you that Democrats have been criticized by Republicans, and Republicans have been criticized by Democrats, you will probably take my word for it. But if the reason for a disagreement is not so obvious, you should ask to see the evidence.

With that in mind, consider [ABC Nightline report](#) on consecrated virgins, and in particular this line:

The vocation has always been controversial.

Were you aware of any controversy? Have you ever heard someone denounce consecrated virgins? Or read newspaper articles about police investigations into the practice? No.

Take the question a step further. What is the reason for this alleged controversy? What are the aspects of consecrated virginity that might give rise to protests? *ABC Nightline* provides no answers.

The *Nightline* report claims that the vocation "was banned for many centuries." Wrong. Needless to say, the Church never banned virginity. For many years the ritual by which a virgin was consecrated fell into desuetude, to be revived after Vatican II. But controversy? Not here.

Why would *ABC Nightline* claim that the topic is controversial, then? The report as a whole is not sensational, nor does it use the alleged controversy as a selling point to excite the audience. Maybe—just maybe—the TV reporters *assume* that their topic is

controversial, because the choice to become a consecrated virgin is so shocking to contemporary sensibilities. Which is another way of saying that consecrated virgins provide a truly radical Christian witness to the secular world.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=819>

Indulgences and the nature of the Church

March 26, 2009

“Indulgences—a rite in the Roman Catholic Church that harkens back to the Middle Ages and the Reformation—are making a return.” That’s the teaser for a [news story that appeared earlier this week in the *Minnesota Star Tribune*](#).

The article itself is so thoroughly ridden with errors that it’s almost comical. Indulgences are not “rites,” and they couldn’t really “return” since they were never gone. Yet public interest in indulgences really is making a return, and that’s a phenomenon worth noticing.

“The Roman Catholic Church stopped granting indulgences as part of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s,” the *Star-Tribune* reports. Wrong again. The Church never stopped granting indulgences. (Indeed you could argue that the Church *could* not stop granting indulgences.) But it’s true that the topic has not often been discussed in the past 25 years. So perhaps it’s understandable that non-Catholic reporters—and even, unfortunately, many Catholics—are on unfamiliar ground in this discussion.

For the record, anyone looking for a terse and authoritative explanation of what indulgences are, and what they are not, can do no better than consulting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, particularly [paragraphs 1471, 1478, and 1479](#). “Through indulgences,” reads the summary found in #1489, “the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory.”

Specific indulgences are granted to the faithful, under prescribed conditions, by the authority of the Holy See. Since Protestants and non-Christians do not recognize the authority of the Holy See, it is understandable that the Church’s teaching on indulgences has been a topic of contention since the time of the Reformation.

Protestants believe that sin can be forgiven only by the power of Jesus Christ, and in a sense that is true. But anyone who recognizes the authority of the Bible should recall that the Lord told St. Peter: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” By declaring an indulgence the Church, exercising this

awesome authority, loses the punishment that results from sin.

If you believe that the Church has the power to forgive sin, it follows naturally that the Church has the power to issue indulgences; what is true in general is true in particular cases. And if you believe that the Church is the Body of Christ on earth, it follows naturally that the Church holds Christ's power to forgive sin.

In short, a proper understanding of indulgences flows easily from a proper understanding of what the Church is. We can't reasonably expect secular journalists to understand the nature of the Church. But all things considered, it's good that they're raising these questions.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=389>

Religious illiteracy

November 17, 2008

A tabernacle has been stolen from a church in Hialeah, Florida. That story is frightening, particularly when one considers the possible motives of those responsible for the theft. Archbishop John Favalora is right to ask the faithful to pray for the return of the Blessed Sacrament, and we should all join in those prayers.

The press coverage of the sacrilege, however, shows a stunning ignorance about Catholicism. Keep in mind that these stories originated from southern Florida, where a substantial proportion of the population is Catholic. If the reporters assigned to the topic were uninformed about Church teaching, their editors could have corrected their errors. But they didn't.

“Archbishop prays for return of sacred box,” read the headline in the [UPI story](#). Sacred box? Is the word “tabernacle” too sophisticated for Miami readers?

Still, to its credit, the UPI story did—after mentioning the appraised cash value of the “box”—get to the crux of the matter, saying that the tabernacle “contains the body of Jesus Christ in the form of the eucharist, according to the Catholic faith.”

The [AP story](#) did use the word “tabernacle” in the headline, and seems to be headed in the right direction until it all comes apart with a crashing blunder:

The custom-made, Spanish-imported jeweled box was stolen late last week.

But it contains something far more important than money: the Eucharist, a symbol of the body of Jesus Christ.

In the unforgettable words of Flannery O'Connor, “If it's a symbol, to hell with it.”

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=306>

Can a sinner become a saint? Yes. Why do you ask?

July 07, 2011

Can someone who is a sinner become a saint?

That, essentially, is the question that Stephen Prothero asks in [a CNN blog post today](#).

The question is remarkable—not because it is difficult, but because the answer is so obvious. No one who has even a passing acquaintance with Christian thought should ask such a question. Prothero, a Professor of Religion at Boston University, has more than a passing acquaintance with the subject. So one suspects that he has something up his sleeve. And sure enough...

But wait. Let's take these questions one at a time. First, can a sinner become a saint? Yes. We are all sinners. Yet we all have the opportunity to become saints. Aside from the Virgin Mary, there is no saint who was not a sinner.

So it's easy to answer Prothero's rhetorical query. Now let's get to the more interesting question: Why did he ask it?

Here I should confess that at the top of this column I only paraphrased Prothero's question, leaving out one crucial factor. Let me quote his words exactly, from the opening line of his post:

Can Catholics abide a saint who had an abortion?

Aha! So the question is not about sin in general, but about one particular sin. A sin that just *happens* to be the focus of a political battle in which the Catholic Church confronts a secular culture.

The answer to Prothero's question remains equally obvious. Abortion is a grave sin, but even grave sins can be forgiven. St. Augustine was a famous philanderer; now we honor him as a great saint. St. Paul led a persecution of the early Church; now we refer to him as The Apostle. There are no limits to God's mercy, nor heights to which Christ cannot raise those whose soiled robes have been washed in his blood.

The subject of Prothero's post is Dorothy Day, a woman whose life was constantly marked by controversy. Prior to her conversion she was promiscuous; after she became a

Catholic she was a fiery pacifist and advocate for the poor who frequently clashed with the American hierarchy. Yet as many witnesses will attest, Dorothy Day was a woman of profound faith, enormous dedication, and absolute commitment to the truths of the Catholic faith.

She never won popularity contests. Dorothy Day was the sort of live-wire Christian witness who invariably manages to “comfort the afflicted—and afflict the comfortable.” My own strong suspicion is that she was, and will eventually be recognized as, a great saint of the Church. Indeed a cause for her beatification is underway. The ostensible reason for Prothero’s column is to wonder aloud whether that cause will eventually be approved.

Because of her abortion. Prior to her conversion, Day procured an illegal abortion. She regretted it, repented of it, described it as a sordid affair. In her later years she condemned legal abortion as a form of genocide. So Prothero asks:

Can you be a saint if you have committed the original sin of contemporary Catholicism?

Do you see what’s wrong with that question? Let me pose it again, this time adding my own emphasis to the key words:

Can you be a saint if you have committed *the original sin* of contemporary Catholicism?

No, Professor Prothero. Abortion is not the “original sin” of contemporary Catholicism. The original sin of contemporary Catholicism is...Original Sin.

Anyone who understands the fundamental teachings of Christianity—and is not driven off course by the ideology—should see the point. Because of Original Sin we are all in the same condition: sinners in need of redemption. Through Christ’s sacrifice, redemption is attainable. So we sinners, however grave our faults, can become saints.

With his supercilious description of abortion as the “original sin of contemporary Catholicism,” Prothero succeeds only in drawing our attention to the fact that abortion is one of the questions on which Catholic teaching is most thoroughly at odds with secular ideology. Having set up that opposition, he goes on to say that he thinks Dorothy Day will indeed be recognized as a saint. Yet once again, his thought process is revealing:

Partly that is because of the Christian teaching of forgiveness. But mostly it is because of the tendency of Catholics to diverge from the official party line on

questions such as homosexuality, birth control and abortion.

Wrong again, Professor.

Notice how quickly Prothero steps over the great truths of redemption and forgiveness—the very core of Christian faith—to concentrate on the latest poll results. By suggesting that the shifting opinions of the Catholic majority will eventually allow for the canonization of Dorothy Day, he introduces two different red herrings. First, he implies that the sin of her youth, which she later repented, now blocks her cause. It does not. Second, he implies that a change in popular opinion will eventually produce a shift in Church teaching—both on abortion and on Dorothy Day’s cause. It will not.

Saints are not chosen by majority vote among all those who describe themselves as Catholics. If Dorothy Day is canonized, it will be because of a solemn pronouncement of the Church: an act of the same teaching magisterium that condemns—and always will condemn—homosexual acts, contraception, and abortion. (By the way, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Dorothy Day would have agreed with that statement. If Stephen Prothero is looking for a heroine to vindicate the cause of theological dissent, he has chosen the wrong champion. Any serious examination of Day’s life will drive home that message.)

More to the point, if Dorothy Day is canonized (or beatified), it will be only after a miracle has been attributed to her intercession. Thus her canonization will have been ratified by the Almighty. Ultimately there is only one vote that matters on the question of canonization, and that decisive vote is cast by the One who has made it possible for great sinners to become great saints.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=817>

Why you need CWN: illustrated once again

August 19, 2008

This headline is popping up in quite a few newspapers in and around Vermont:

Former Vatican counsel castigates Vt. Church

The story— [here's a representative sample](#)—involves testimony by Father Tom Doyle in a case involving clerical abuse.

Father Doyle is a well known figure in these cases. Back in the 1980s he was among a handful of people who tried—energetically but unsuccessfully—to persuade the US bishops that they should confront the problem forthrightly. He remained outspoken on the issue, and while his comments on Church authority raise concerns about his own theological beliefs, there's no question that he qualifies as an expert witness in a secular courtroom.

But the headline doesn't describe Father Doyle as an expert witness; it calls him a "former Vatican counsel." That description suggests someone high up in the Roman Curia—perhaps the equivalent of a White House counsel, who has regular access to the Oval Office. The headline conveys the impression that some ranking official in Rome has singled out the Burlington diocese for special criticism. That's not the case. Father Doyle once worked in the office of the apostolic nuncio in Washington. It's true that he handled canonical affairs; in that sense you could say that he was a "counsel" for an office of the Vatican. But by no stretch of the imagination was he an important policy-maker for the universal Church.

It's easy for secular journalists, who know little about the workings of the Vatican, to exaggerate the importance of Church functionaries. One regularly sees references to statements by "important Vatican officials," who turn out to hold minor clerical posts in the Roman bureaucracy.

The people who run the Vatican post office are "Vatican officials," and since mail service is important, you could describe them as "important" Vatican officials. Keep that in mind, next time you see that phrase.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=255>

Desecration of the Eucharist: a story not worth telling

October 03, 2008

As a journalist, ordinarily I don't like to ignore the facts. Sometimes the news is disconcerting, even depressing. But I generally believe in airing the facts, however sad they may be, and trusting in Providence that the truth will prevail, and the truth is on our side.

There are exceptions, however. Sometimes I conclude that someone is manufacturing a story, simply in order to call attention to himself or his pet cause. In those cases I might make the editorial judgment that readers don't really need to hear this "news," and I might let the story drop. I am especially likely to make that judgment when the individual uses unethical means to gain publicity.

Some weeks ago, for example, a faculty member at the University of Minnesota drew nationwide publicity by boasting that he would desecrate the Eucharist. While some Catholic media outlets shouted out their denunciations, I chose to downplay the story. I didn't want to give this wretched little man any more publicity. I feared that the feverish debate might encourage some other misguided individual to consider the same sort of blasphemous promise—as indeed the Minnesota professor, Paul Myers, had apparently been inspired by the story of an earlier desecration in Florida.

Eventually Myers carried out his threat. "I pierced it [the sacred Host] with a rusty nail," he reported in an internet bulletin. It was sad and horrifying act. But again I chose to downplay the news, refusing to give this perverse academic exhibitionist the publicity he so obviously craved.

Even in retrospect, I am not sure whether I made the right editorial decision. This week we have heard stories about another instance of highly publicized desecration: an internet site whose creator does demonic pleasure (is there any other way to describe it?) in presenting films of blasphemous acts.

You will not find those films, nor links to them, on this site. It is enough to know that the desecration is taking place. That knowledge, by itself, should encourage Catholics to make acts of reparation.

Why is it happening? I believe there are three reasons.

First, it is happening because it is tolerated. The University of Minnesota has announced that Professor Myers will not be disciplined for his egregious offense. University precepts requiring respect for the beliefs of others do not apply to Catholics. Rules against “hate crime” evidently do not apply to hatred of Christ. Anyone who dishonors the Qu’ran knows that he is risking his life; someone who dishonors the Lord Jesus feels safe.

Second, it is happening because someone—I mean, Someone—wants it to happen. Pathetic individuals, scrabbling for their 15 minutes of public notice, find blasphemy a foolproof technique. A generation or two ago, even the most hardened anti-Catholic bigot would have shied away from such a frontal assault on the Holy of Holies. But we live at a time when hatred for the Church is intense, and the Enemy is not afraid to show his face. Father Tom Euteneuer of Human Life International made the point succinctly:

Unfortunately, in the internet age, it is likely that this kind of crime against Our Lord will generate even more profanity. Never in the history of the world has there been such a deep-seated and widespread campaign of blasphemy against Jesus, and there is only one word for it—satanic.

Finally, it is happening because Christ and his Cross, Christ and his Eucharist, remaining stumbling blocks for non-believers. Paul Myers claimed that he wanted to desecrate the Eucharist in order to show that a consecrated Host is only, in his contemptuous words, “a cracker.” But if he really thought that this was only a cracker, he would not be so obsessed with the need to dishonor it. Myers claimed that he only wanted to poke fun at Catholic beliefs, but one does not tease friends by insulting their most cherished beliefs. This was deadly serious, and Myers knew it.

Father Donald Keefe, a Jesuit theologian (whose works on the reality of the Eucharist have been an immense help to me), challenged Myers in a letter that is worth quoting at some length:

Your conduct with respect to the Eucharist is execrable, but that you would spend so much time and energy on that desecration, and yet more upon publicizing your iniquity, is indisputable evidence that you take the Eucharist very, very seriously. So you should: it is the central reality of the universe; more; it represents our only ground for joy. There has been a long line of people like yourself unable to bear its existence and intent upon its abolition, but that is a cause lost from the beginning. You should think on this perdurance more deeply than you have: hatred is shallow stuff.

Exactly. Professor Myers is not the first person to thrust a nail into the Body of Christ. It has been done before, by Roman soldiers, who thought they were eliminating a problem. Crucifixion, they confidently believed, would be the final humiliation for Jesus and the definitive proof of their imperial power. Two millennia later the Roman empire lies in ruins—with basilicas built on the remains of pagan temples—and the liturgical calendar includes a feast of the *Exaltation* of the Cross.

Each one of us offends God every day, and our sins add to the suffering of the crucified Christ. Deliberate desecration of the Eucharist is a particularly grave sin (as well as a grave offense against public decency), but I still cannot accept the notion that these vile efforts deserve journalistic attention. Sins by themselves are not “news” in the ordinary everyday sense.

If we called attention to every sin, to be fair we would also have to call attention as well to every sacrament—every bid to balance the spiritual ledger. Then we might become more aware that while desecration of the Eucharist is a terrible thing, the celebration of the Eucharist—every day, in every parish church—is incalculably more important.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=273>

Part II: When Bias Is Blatant

Brace yourself for the annual media assault on Christian orthodoxy

April 15, 2011

Holy Week is nearly upon us. Brace yourself for the media onslaught.

All eyes will turn toward the Church during this coming week. For believing Christians, that means an intense period of prayer. For most major media outlets, it means another chance to throw darts at a favorite target.

Each year, as Easter looms on the horizon, ambitious scholars and journalists and publicity-seekers seize the opportunity to debunk Christianity in general, or criticize the teachings of the Catholic Church in particular. This year will be no different.

- This is the time of year when the “Jesus Seminar” often trots out a new theory about what the “historical Jesus” really said. No matter how slim the evidence is to support this theory, and no matter how transparently the scholars put their own pet ideas in the Lord’s mouth, and no matter how thoroughly the *real* historical evidence (which matches the Gospel narratives) belies the theory, the story captures headlines. Why? For two reasons. First, most workaday journalists are so ignorant about Christianity, they don’t realize how preposterous the theory really is. Second, many journalists are delighted to thumb their noses at Christian orthodoxy.
- This is the time of year when an archeologist announces that he has made some amazing new discovery, which—he claims—overthrows important assumptions about the Christian faith and/or the early Church. This year we already have one contender in this category: an Israeli researcher who wants us to believe that [he has found the nails with which Jesus was fixed to the Cross](#). To be fair, this claim is not necessarily offensive to Christian beliefs. But the claim is also viewed with skepticism (to put it mildly) by serious scholars. The same researcher made the same claims months ago, without attracting much attention. It’s no coincidence that the story is circulating again now, as Holy Week draws near and journalists look for new angles.
- This is the time of year when commentators prepare their own essays on what

they see as the inadequacies of the Christian faith, and especially the Catholic Church. Just as surely as the Pope delivers his *Urbi et Orbi* message on Easter Sunday morning, the pundits will deliver their thoughts on what the Pope *should have* said and done to reform the Church. This year, regrettably, the critics will have plenty of ammunition. The [astonishing insensitivity of Bishop Vangheluwe](#), coupled with his hideous betrayal of trust, has provoked justifiable outrage in Belgium, and stoked the fires of the sex-abuse scandal once again. In Ireland, a new report is expected any day now on [the mishandling of abuse complaints](#) in the Cloyne diocese; we have every reason to believe that the report will be harsh. Here in the US we have the new outcropping of the same scandal in Philadelphia. We already know that the PBS show “Frontline” [will examine one flagrant case of abuse and cover-up](#). You can be sure there will be other such reports.

Don’t be surprised by the media onslaught. It’s coming; you can count on it. Be prepared: not just intellectually but spiritually. Don’t let the negative stories upset your equanimity, or distract your focus from the real business of Holy Week. Yes, the Church will suffer once again from the scorn of the pundits. But isn’t this the appropriate time for us all to accept the suffering, as our Lord accepted the Cross? Keep in mind, too, that after the sneering and the spitting and the mocking and the shouting we arrive at the glorious triumph of Easter.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=794>

Debunking the ‘gospel conspiracy’ theory

March 17, 2011

As Lent advances and Holy Week draws near, we can safely predict that the radical intellectuals of the “Jesus Seminar” will soon be making their annual appearance in the headlines. Each year, as devout Christians prepare to observe their most solemn holy days, these dissenters make a new effort to deconstruct the faith. Watch for it: coming soon to your local media outlets.

By now we know roughly what we should expect. The critics of Christianity have created an orthodoxy of their own. Whether their ideas are conveyed in [pseudo-scholarship of Elaine Pagels](#) or the sensationalist novels of Dan Brown, they emphasize the same basic themes. Jesus did not do and say what the Gospels record, they inform us. The real nature of Christ’s teaching, they claim, was suppressed by sinister forces in the early Church. As evidence to support their claim, they cite documents such as the “Gospel of Thomas” or the “Gospel of Judas”—documents which, they tell us, those sinister forces suppressed.

This year, fortunately, we have available a powerful antidote to the deconstructionist argument. Charles Hill, a New Testament scholar at the Reformed Theological Seminary, has written a very useful book: *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*, published by Oxford University Press. Hill thoroughly debunks the “great Gospel conspiracy,” demonstrating that the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were always recognized, from the earliest days of the Christian community, as carrying unique authority.

The other documents touted by the deconstructionists—the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas, etc.—were circulated during the early years of the Church (although some of these documents are not nearly as ancient as their supporters claim), and did have some influence, particularly with some small dissident sects. But they were never regarded as authoritative. The other documents were read and discussed in private; the four Gospels were read in church.

My colleague Jeff Mirus [has already reviewed Hill’s book](#), and I do not intend to duplicate his work. Instead I want to focus on one particular aspect of Hill’s work.

Hill is an engaging writer, and he treats his subject like a detective story, working his way through the available clues to construct his case. He shows, with meticulous detail, how the earliest Christian writers distinguished between the Gospels and other works. He proves that from the early years of the 2nd century, shortly after the death of St. John, those four Gospels were venerated. He weighs the claims of the other “gospels” and casts them aside, easily convincing readers that they never rivaled the influence of the four Evangelists.

Then, as he wraps up his argument, Hill makes a point that reminded this reader of the great fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes: He calls attention to the dog that did not bark.

If there had been a struggle in the early Church, and some powerful forces suppressed the “other gospels,” the historical record should bear some evidence of that conflict, Hill argues. But in fact, while there were many other debates among the early Christians, there is no evidence of a debate about which writings qualified as “the Gospels.” There was no need for Church officials to settle the argument, because the argument never arose. There was, then, no “conspiracy” to silence other voices. There was no drive to advance some documents, and suppress others, for political purposes.

Or at least there was no such drive *then*, in the early years of Christianity. But there is just such a drive *now*. That effort is being made by the deconstructionists; they are doing precisely what they accuse the Church of having done: seeking to promote their own favorite “gospels,” and deny the authority of others, for political reasons.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=786>

Advance warning: inaccurate news reports coming soon

July 08, 2010

Be prepared.

Sometime in the next few days the Vatican is expected to release new norms for the handling of sex-abuse complaints. Dozens of news reports will undoubtedly follow, saying that the Vatican has changed policies in response to public pressure. Those reports will be wrong.

The norms are changing. The policies are not.

According to reports that have leaked extensively this week, the Vatican will change a few norms of canon law, bringing the law into conformity with the policies *already in use* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. To date these policies have been authorized—first by Pope John Paul II, then by Benedict XVI—as allowable *exceptions* to the canonical rules. Now they will *become* the rules.

So—unless the leaked reports are all wrong—the rules will change, but not practices of the CDF.

It's not that hard to understand, if you pay a bit of attention to the details. But recently reporters have been rushing into print without making the effort to understand Church law.

The norms are changing. The policies are not.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=674>

Of all the Rutten ideas

May 04, 2011

While Catholics all over the world are still celebrating the beatification of Pope John Paul II, curmudgeonly columnist Tim Rutten of the *Los Angeles Times* is [unhappy](#) because proper procedures were not followed.

Proper procedures, it seems, would require the Vatican to consult Tim Rutten before proceeding with a beatification. Tim would not have approved this one, because John Paul II was a nasty old conservative. To prove the point, Rutten cites the opinion of Hans Küng that John Paul II and Benedict XVI have made the Catholic Church a sad and lonely place. (Neither Küng nor Rutten offers an explanation for the cheering mob in St. Peter's Square. They didn't *look* sad and lonely. But I digress.)

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which does exhaustive research into the lives of candidates for beatification, may not wish to rely too heavily on Tim Rutten's opinions, since the columnist takes a somewhat more cavalier approach to research. For example:

Many Catholics worry about a Vatican that fires an Australian bishop for speaking in favor of ordaining women and married men, but declines to act against a Belgian prelate who unapologetically admits to molesting young boys.

This would be a plausible argument, if the Vatican had indeed declined to act against Bishop Roger Vangheluwe. But in fact the disgraced Belgian bishop has been [suspended from ministry](#). In fact, he was pressed to resign his episcopal office as soon as his abuse became known—unlike Bishop William Morris, who remained at the helm of the Toowoomba diocese for 5 years after making the heterodox statements that drew the Vatican's scrutiny and eventually [led to his removal](#). Immediately following that inaccurate statement, Rutten offers another:

Many are troubled too by the U.S. Catholic bishops—all conservatives appointed by the last two popes—who attempt to force theologians to resume the old practice of submitting their work to the local prelate for approval before publication.

All of the American bishops are conservatives? *All* of them? Maybe it's possible to

justify that phrase, by reasoning that the bishops are all conservative in comparison with, say, Hans Küng. But with the remainder of sentence, Rutten simply becomes unhinged from reality. Which bishops are forcing theologians to submit their work for approval prior to publication? Could we have a list? No. It's fiction.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=800>

Worst Story of the Month Award: an early nomination

June 01, 2011

It's awfully early to be making nominations for the Worst Reporting of the Month, but still...

Frankly, I had never heard of the *International Business Times* until today. A quick sampling of its contents leaves me wondering whether it can be considered a serious publication—and indeed, whether the editors are entirely familiar with the English language. (Read on; you'll see what I mean.) Still, because of the wonders of internet search engines, a reader looking for news about the Catholic Church today is likely to encounter the *International Business Times* and its [provocative story headline](#):

Why Church would rather let you die than use a condom.

The subject, ostensibly, is the past week's Vatican conference on AIDS. The *IBT* story opens with a grudging acknowledgement that the Catholic Church “might be one of the largest providers of HIV/AIDS care facilities in the world.” The words “might be” and “one of” are misplaced in that sentence. The Church is by far the world's foremost sponsor of AIDS-treatment facilities. No one familiar with the facts about AIDS would bother to deny that reality. But is the *IBT* reporter familiar with the facts? The next paragraph raises doubts:

Statements issued by Pope Benedict XVI during the past years had ignited the hopes of condom promoters, mainly due to its *[sic]* ambiguity. One such statement published in Vatican newspaper *[sic]* in November 2010 had the Pope saying that condoms can be justified in certain cases, “in the intention of reducing the risk of infection”. The statement was in the context of protecting male prostitutes from Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD). As it turns out, even now, at the eve of 30th year since HIV/AIDS was first detected, Church is not willing to let believers go easy with their lives.

Where does that paragraph go wrong? Let me count the ways:

1. Pope Benedict made exactly one statement that raised the hopes of the

condom-distribution advocates. The use of the plural is misplaced. That's sloppy reporting.

2. The statement in question was published in a book; the Vatican newspaper reprinted it. That's sloppier reporting.
3. The Pope's statement was not speaking about protecting male prostitutes from AIDS; he was speaking about a hypothetical male prostitute who might be inspired to protect his clients from AIDS. That's the sloppiest reporting of all, because it entirely misses the point of the Pope's remark.

Still, give the reporter credit for one accurate sentence in that paragraph: The Church "is not willing to let believers go easy with their lives." If your greatest goal in life is to take it easy, Catholicism might pose a measure of inconvenience. Yet there are worse things that could be said about the Church, as the *IBT* report demonstrates:

Turning away from something as ubiquitous as condom in the 21st century might even render the Church completely out-dated, according to condom advocates.

Nobody wants to be considered "outdated." But suppose I were to write:

Turning away from something as useful as Catholic World News in the 21st century might even render the Church completely out-dated, according to CWN editor Phil Lawler.

What would that sentence convey? Absolutely nothing, apart from the unsurprising information that the salesman commends his own product. So too with the condom advocates. Their only support for the argument that the Church is "outdated" is the fact that the Church doesn't do what they do.

The *International Business Times* story contains some new and factual reporting. Unfortunately there's no overlap. What's new is not factual, and what's factual is not news.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=811>

The bishops and their(?) lobbyists

October 19, 2009

Writing in *Time* magazine, Amy Sullivan asks: “Will the Church Try to Block Health Reform?”

The question is ironic, in light of the energy spent by Catholic officials—especially at the US Conference for Catholic Bishops—to promote the health-care reform package. Now it seems the White House and its journalistic allies are setting the USCCB up as scapegoats, in the case the campaign fails.

Sullivan’s complaint—and it’s fair to assume she’s picked up this complaint from the Obama administration—is that the USCCB assured supporters that a cosmetic change in the proposed legislation known as the Capps Amendment, prohibiting the most direct forms of federal funding for abortion, would be enough to ensure the American bishops’ support for the bill. But after that amendment was approved, Cardinal Justin Rigali announced that it wasn’t good enough—that since the measure still provided ample indirect subsidies for abortion, the bishops could not support it. The bishops, Sullivan suggests, had reneged on a political commitment.

You won’t find—anywhere—a commitment by the US bishops to support a particular piece of legislation. But if Sullivan’s reporting is accurate, some lawmakers felt that they had received such a commitment. How could that have happened?

Deal Hudson, who has spent enough time in Washington to know how these things work, has [a likely explanation](#). Some USCCB lobbyist(s), acting in the bishops’ name (or at least claiming to do so), gave the assurance that the Capps Amendment would do the trick. Now Hudson wants to know:

From whom at the USCCB did Congressional Democrats receive assurances that Capps was going to be enough to satisfy the bishops?

Good question. Here’s another: If a USCCB lobbyist overstepped his bounds, made a promise he should not have made, and thereby put his bosses in an awkward position, will those bosses (the bishops) realize that they’ve been poorly represented, and perhaps need a different lobbyist?

Come to think of it, here’s another question: The bishops had no incentive to promote the Capps Amendment; it didn’t fix the problems they saw in the legislation. But the Democrats did have an incentive to pass the amendment: precisely to quiet the

bishops' opposition. So if it was a USCCB staff aide who persuaded lawmakers to approve that amendment, who was he really working for? When this lobbyist was telling legislators how to assuage the bishops' concerns, was he really lobbying Congress on behalf of the bishops? Or was he, in effect, lobbying the bishops on behalf of the Democratic majority?

Deal Hudson ends his analysis of this telling episode with a conclusion that's right on the money:

Sullivan's purpose in writing her article is to point a finger at the bishops for thwarting health care reform. What she has really done is reveal the close relationships that exist between the USCCB, Congressional Democrats, and the Obama administration.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=514>

Part III: When the Media Choose Sides

Anti-Catholic Catholics

July 13, 2011

When Bill Keller of the *New York Times* reviewed a new book on the papacy by John Julius Norwich, William Donahue of the Catholic League was—to say the least—[unimpressed](#). “It’s hard to say who is dumber—Bill Keller or John Julius Norwich,” Donahue said, citing several gross errors in both the book and the Keller review.

No doubt responding to Donahue’s broadside, the editors of the *New York Times* [text](#) Offered readers a peek into their own thought processes:

Through the years, The New York Times’s coverage of the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican has received sharp criticism from practicing Catholics — including the past eight years that Bill Keller has been the paper’s executive editor. Yet Keller, who wrote this week’s cover review of *Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy*, by John Julius Norwich, was raised within the fold.

That paragraph would be perfectly logical, and accurate, but for one major flaw. Can you spot it?

The lede makes four assertions of fact: that the *Times* is frequently accused of anti-Catholicism, that Bill Keller has been the executive editor, that Keller reviewed the Norwich book, and that Keller was raised as a Catholic. All are true. So where’s the problem? Go ahead; read the paragraph again if you like.

The problem lies in a single word: “Yet.”

If you are a sports fan, you should instantly recognize the problem with this sentence: “John is very tall, yet he is a good basketball player.” The word “yet,” in that context, suggests that John is a good basketball player in spite of his height, whereas we all know that height is a great asset in basketball.

So too with anti-Catholicism. If you’re choosing up sides for a basketball team, it’s not bad strategy to select the tallest men in the group. If you’re looking for people with an animus against the Catholic Church, it’s not a bad idea to start with people who have consciously deserted the faith. Bill Keller—who identifies himself as “a ‘collapsed Catholic’—beyond lapsed”—qualifies for membership in the large fraternity of journalists who enjoy criticizing the institution they have forsaken.

There are reasons, after all, why people leave the Catholic Church. Very few

individuals will openly admit that they left because of their own weaknesses, because they could not meet the demands imposed by the faith. Far more frequently, the lapsed (or “collapsed”) Catholic will say that he disagrees with the Church’s teachings—more often than not, on issues involving sexuality. Since those same issues are at the forefront in popular criticism of the Catholic Church, the lapsed Catholics slide easily into the camp of the anti-Catholic propagandists.

Still, give Bill Keller and his ilk credit for this much: The “collapsed” Catholics admit that they have left the fold. In that respect they are far more honest, and far less dangerous as propagandists, than the many other anti-Catholics who continue to attack the Church from within, insisting that they remain Catholics while they do their utmost to subvert the faith.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=818>

Roman Catholic Womenpriests and their journalistic cheerleaders

June 13, 2011

This is getting to be a very old story: When the secular media cover events in which women claim ordination as Catholic priests, reporters abandon all ordinary journalistic standards. A [story posted June 12 on the NPR site](#), about a ceremony in Maryland, offers a fairly spectacular example. The story begins:

In 2002, seven women were secretly ordained as priests by two Roman Catholic bishops in Germany. After their ordination, a kind of domino effect ensued.

Interesting. Just last week, Roman Catholic Womenpriests was claiming that *three* Roman Catholic bishops participated in that supposed ordination in 2002. Now that one of the bishops has been exposed as the leader of an odd little schismatic sect, the number is down to two. Who are those two bishops? Do they really exist? Are they really members of the Catholic hierarchy? If they are real Catholic bishops, a reporter who could identify them would have a blockbuster story: the names of bishops who defied the Vatican. If they aren't real Catholic bishops, a reporter could prove that Roman Catholic Womenpriests is entirely fraudulent. Yet the reporters who cover these mock ordinations do not follow up on the question. They are evidently satisfied with a quick portrayal of women playing at being Catholic priests; they aren't interested in the big story

The NPR story continues:

Those seven women went on to ordain other women, and a movement to ordain female priests all around the world was born.

As [Terry Mattingly pointed out last week](#), any halfway competent reporter covering the religion beat should recognize that something is amiss here. Even if you believe that those seven women were validly ordained as priests, that's not enough to sustain the Womenpriests delusion. In the Catholic Church, priests don't ordain priests; *bishops* ordain priests.

Let's suppose, for the sake of the argument, that there really were two legitimate Catholic bishops participating at that 2002 ceremony on the Danube. Let's suppose that

they intended to ordain at least one woman as a bishop. The licit ordination of a Roman Catholic bishop requires the approval of the Holy See. Anyone who ordains a bishop without Vatican approval is subject to automatic excommunication. So even if that Danube ordination had been otherwise valid, the participants—both the ordaining bishops and the ordained priestesses—would have separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church.

And we still have not even reached the most important reason for recognizing the Womenpriests movement as delusional. As Pope John Paul II [definitively proclaimed in 1994](#), and then-Cardinal Ratzinger [emphatically underlined the next year](#), the Church has always taught and believed that women *cannot* be ordained. Blessed John Paul II wrote in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”

The point here is not that the Church chooses to withhold ordination from women. The point is that the Church “has not authority whatsoever” to ordain women. A priestly vocation is a gift of the Holy Spirit, not merely a credential passed out by the hierarchy. If the Holy Spirit confers that gift only upon men—as the Church definitely teaches that He does—there is nothing Catholic bishops could do to change that reality. Even if there were bishops on the Danube, and even if they intended to ordain women, and even if (*per impossibile*) they were able to finesse the question of a Vatican mandate, they *still* could not have ordained women as Catholic priests. It’s an impossibility.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests denies this solemn teaching of the Church, of course. So it’s not unreasonable for secular reporters—who should, in theory, be neutral regarding theological questions—to let the women state their claims. But competent reporters should, at a bare minimum, at least *mention* what the Catholic Church teaches. No such mention can be found in the NPR article.

(I note in passing that the American taxpayers indirectly subsidized this National Public Radio report. In light of the current terror that even indirect government subsidies for religion might violate the Establishment clause of the First Amendment, I wonder whether there’s a case to be made that this report offered unconstitutional government support for that peculiar religion known as Roman Catholic Womenpriests.)

The key paragraph of the NPR report reads:

On a recent June day in Maryland, four more women were ordained as priests. The gallery at St. John’s United Church of Christ was filled with Catholic priests and nuns, there to support the women and the ordination movement — though visitors

were asked not to photograph them.

How many flagrant departures from ordinary journalistic standards can you find in that paragraph? There are several:

- Ordinarily news stories begin with a dateline, giving the time and place of the events described. Here we have only “a recent June day in Maryland.” Maybe that should be a tip-off, letting us know how much accuracy we should expect from the article.
- Next the report tells us that four women were ordained. There is not a hint that anyone could deny the validity of their ordination—let alone the rather obvious fact that its validity is denied by the very group to which they claim membership: the Catholic Church.
- Even a very lackadaisical reporter should recognize that some explanation is necessary when the supposed ordination of Catholic priests takes place in a building belonging to the United Church of Christ. No such explanation is forthcoming.
- If the priests and nuns in the gallery are part of the story—and this reporter did mention them, so they are—the journalists who agreed not to photograph them are not giving us the whole story. They are only giving us those parts of the story that are convenient to the claims of Womenpriests and their supporters.

The NPR story gives us a partial explanation of the willingness to protect the anonymity of the supportive priests and nuns: they might be punished by the Church for attending this illicit ceremony. Yes, that’s true. They might be deprived of the jobs they now hold, representing an institution whose authority they secretly disdain. A crusading journalist of a different type might expose those priests and nuns, and thus help to eliminate corruption within the Catholic Church. But the journalists covering this event are committed to a different agenda.

Toward the end, the NPR report acknowledges that Roman Catholic Womenpriests “are breaking Church law—specifically Canon 10:24.” The story does not explain what Canon 10:24 says—which is not surprising, since there is no Canon 10:24. But Canon 1024 says flatly: “Only a baptized man can validly receive sacred ordination.”

By staging these mock ordinations and presenting themselves as Catholic priests, the members of Roman Catholic Womenpriests are violating canon law in several different

ways. But they are not violating Canon 1024, because they are not receiving sacred ordination.

Suppose I throw a rock into the air, with the intention of causing it to rise forever. Am I violating the law of gravity? No. I am defying it, perhaps, but if you look at my action objectively, you realize that it is pointless, even pathetic. The law of gravity will not be broken. My rock will come back down to earth. And Roman Catholic Womenpriests will not be Roman Catholic priests.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=813>

The Pope's message turned upside-down

November 24, 2010

Today, what the world thinks Pope Benedict said is almost exactly the opposite of what he clearly intended.

In Chapter 11 of his new book, *Light of the World*, Pope Benedict mounts a strong defense of his argument that condom use is not the appropriate means of fighting the AIDS epidemic.

This week, millions of people received the impression that the Pope made precisely the opposite argument—that he *recommended* condoms as a defense against AIDS—due to the most spectacular public-relations bungling of this pontificate.

“Pope confirms his approval of condom use against disease,” reads the [headline in the Boston Globe](#). The [identical story](#), running in the *New York Times*, carries an only slightly less inaccurate headline: “After Condom Remarks, Vatican Confirms Shift.” The London *Daily Mail* took the prize, however, with [this appalling interpretation](#) of the Pope's remarks: “Just days after the historic change of attitude to sex, he declared the contraception can be used by anyone if it prevents HIV.”

In fact, Pope Benedict made absolutely no public statement on this subject yesterday. These newspaper stories referred to a new “clarification” offered by the papal spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi. Having previously confirmed, quite accurately, that the Pope intended no change in Church teaching, Father Lombardi had questioned the Pontiff on a specific point. In *Light of the World*, the Pope makes a highly speculative point about the morality of condom use, using the example of a male prostitute. Some readers concluded that the Pope was referring specifically to homosexual acts. But when questioned on that point, Father Lombardi told reporters, the Pope said that the same moral reasoning would apply, “whether it's a man or woman or a transsexual.”

Right. The Pope's reasoning applies to a male or female or transsexual *prostitute*.

Is it really necessary to point out that someone who is engaged in prostitution has moral problems that extend beyond the use of contraceptives?

Pope Benedict said that for such a person, the decision to use a condom might show a

flickering of moral sensibility. Thousands of pundits leapt to the conclusion that the Pontiff was endorsing condom use. It would be equally logical to say that he was endorsing prostitution!

When the Pope made this point in the interview that formed the basis for *Light of the World*, his interlocutor, journalist Peter Seewald, immediately raised the obvious question: “Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?” The Pope replied:

She of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.

Any objective reader who digests the Pope’s full argument, as it is presented in *Light of the World*, recognizes that his emphasis is on the first portion of that sentence: the insistence that condoms do not offer a “real or moral solution” to the AIDS epidemic.

Yes, the Pope does go further; one cannot lightly dismiss the latter part of the sentence. But in no way can it be interpreted as an invitation to doubt the Church’s constant teaching.

Ironically, just a few pages earlier in the book, the Pope had admitted that he was caught off guard by the reaction to his famous (or notorious) Regensburg address. He explained that he had intended to deliver an academic lecture, and not taken into account that his words would be interpreted as a political statement. Now, perhaps, this brilliant scholar is being reminded anew that he cannot overlook the way his statements might be distorted.

In an [earlier comment on this debacle](#), I blamed *L’Osservatore Romano* for publishing the Pope’s remarks out of context. [Writing in the National Catholic Reporter](#), John Allen reveals that the Vatican newspaper actually did not break an embargo on the book, as I had charged; *L’Osservatore Romano* had the publisher’s permission to print the excerpt in question. Allen suggests, therefore: “If you want to be mad at somebody over the timing, try the Vatican Publishing House.” I value John Allen’s advice, and in this case I am fully prepared to take it. I am angry with the Vatican Publishing House, too.

Nor is the premature publication of this excerpt the only reason to be angry. Why didn’t the Vatican publisher warn Pope Benedict that his statement was bound to be distorted? Why didn’t the Pope himself recognize that risk? Why haven’t other Vatican officials offered real clarifications—as opposed to the turgid and confusing statements

from Father Lombardi? There is plenty of blame to go around.

However the blame is allocated, the net result is the same: The Pope tried to make one argument, and the world now thinks that he said the opposite. How many such grotesque errors must this pontificate endure, before we see a real effort to clean up the way the Vatican presents ideas to the public?

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=734>

Extinction, accepted in ‘the Jesuit tradition’

April 26, 2011

The *Washington Post* has noticed the phenomenon to which we called your attention last week: the precipitous drop in the number of American Jesuits.

The *Post* story is short, and generally friendly. But it doesn’t avoid the bottom line: “Jesuits are vanishing from the Washington area, where they established the first Catholic parish in the Colonies.”

Did I mention that the story was sympathetic? Maybe this will explain why:

Jesuits are the archetype of priests with PhDs who protest in the streets or otherwise advocate for causes, often politically liberal ones.

“Often” for political liberal causes? That would suggest that Jesuits sometimes demonstrate in favor of politically conservative causes. Try to name one. It’s true that one might occasionally encounter a Jesuit at a right-to-life rally. But Jesuits: plural? Not likely.

Despite the catastrophic decline in membership in the Society of Jesus, the *Post* happily passes along the party line, suggesting that while the Jesuits can’t seem to attract young men into their ranks, still they continue to exercise considerable influence, through the various schools and universities they control. There are no longer many Jesuits teaching at those schools, and the attitudes prevalent on campus would shock a Jesuit—or a Jesuit-trained student—of previous generations. That doesn’t matter. The important thing is the Jesuits still have clout, and the “Jesuit tradition”—a phrase that seems as malleable as the “spirit of Vatican II”, and usually connotes the same things—is upheld:

But even as the Jesuits brace for near-extinction in this part of the world, their ideals are spreading.

For the *Washington Post*, “this part of the world” means the area inside the Washington Beltway. For Jesuit institutions the clientele can be described more specifically as generally well educated, affluent, mostly Caucasian, ethnically Catholic. What do we

know about such people as a group? First, that they aren't having many children; they are reproducing at or below the demographic replacement level. Second, that they aren't providing young Catholics; their children tend to drift away from the Church. So in the long run this group will cease to exist.

You might say that the *Post* is right; the Jesuits are indeed spreading their ideals—that is, the ideals that have guided the Jesuit order in its spectacular decline—around the Washington area. They're teaching young Catholics how to follow them into extinction.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=797>

The argument from (anti-Catholic) authority

January 28, 2011

There's nothing particularly original about the arguments presented by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof in [his condemnation of Bishop Thomas Olmsted](#) of Phoenix. In fact, there's very little argumentation of any sort in the Kristof column. The Times columnist makes not the slightest effort to understand the bishop's decision to announce that St. Joseph Hospital no longer should be considered a Catholic institution. Kristof writes:

Now the bishop, in effect, is excommunicating the entire hospital—all because it saved a woman's life.

That claim is absurd on its face. Obviously the bishop is not punishing the hospital for saving a life. No one really thinks that. And yet Kristof writes it. Why? Because he is determined to offer a completely one-sided presentation of the case. There is a conflict between the bishop and the hospital; that's clear enough. But what is the nature of that conflict? Again Kristof makes his case in the most simplistic possible terms:

One approach focuses upon dogma, sanctity, rules and the punishment of sinners. The other exalts compassion for the needy and mercy for sinners— and, perhaps, above all, inclusiveness.

Kristof is determined to be superficial. But let's probe just a bit below the surface. In the last phrase of the sentence quoted above, he suggests that St. Joseph Hospital held to an "inclusive" view in providing health care, and Bishop Olmsted rejected it in favor of his more limited vision. Actually the opposite is true. The hospital decided to provide care only for an adult woman, and in the process deliberately to sacrifice the life of her unborn child. Bishop Olmsted insisted that the unborn child—surely the neediest person involved in this sad story—deserved compassionate care as well.

Kristof never even acknowledges the ethical tensions that arose from this medical dilemma. His arguments are all arguments from authority: not the bishop's authority, but his own.

It was predictable that conservative Catholic analysts would resent Kristof's attack on Church authority. But it is surprising, given the columnist's failure to mount any persuasive argument against the Catholic position, that many liberal Catholics would applaud his presentation.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=762>

Part IV: None So Blind

Media malpractice

February 01, 2010

In its coverage of the March for Life (if there was any coverage at all) did your local newspaper or TV station convey the impression that there were a few thousands participants? That the marchers were mostly middle-aged men? That there were many pro-abortion counter-demonstrators along the parade route? If you had any such reports—and you probably did—then you were a victim of [media malpractice](#).

Video cameras are wonderful things. “Facts,” as John Adams said, “are stubborn things.” A reporter might write that the March consisted of a few thousand grumpy old men, but if you see the pictures—better, the videos—you know that’s nonsense.

But wait! you ask. Video cameras have only been readily available to ordinary folks in the last few years, but television news crews have had them for decades. Why haven’t we seen unedited footage of the March for Life on the network news? Good question.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=607>

Apart from the mass killings, things are so pleasant!

August 16, 2011

One-child policy a surprising boon for China girls

That's the headline on [an AP story](#) that should win some sort of prize for morally obtuse reporting.

The most obvious outcome of the China's one-child policy, coupled with the deeply-ingrained desire for male children, has been the routine destruction of Chinese girls in the womb. The UN estimates that 43 million girls are "missing" in China today, due primarily to sex-selection abortions.

But for those who aren't killed, the policy is a "boon," AP tells us. The story explains that there are more girls studying in the finest schools, more girls owning laptops, more girls receiving lavish gifts from their families. Life is good—for those girls who survive long enough to experience it.

After 14 paragraphs of upbeat reporting, the AP story finally notices a cloud on the horizon:

Crediting the one-child policy with improving the lives of women is jarring, given its history and how it's harmed women in other ways. Facing pressure to stay under population quotas, overzealous family planning officials have resorted to forced sterilizations and late-term abortions, sometimes within weeks of delivery, although such practices are illegal.

So if you don't count the women who are slaughtered in the womb, and the women who are subjected to involuntary sterilization, and the women who have their unborn children torn from their wombs by the government-backed butchers who drive around the country in vans equipped as slap-dash abortion clinics, and the women who live in fear, trying to dodge the family-planning officials who will punish them for pregnancy, and those who live with regrets, having sacrificed their children—if you exclude all those women—well then the one-child policy is a "boon" to the others.

Thanks, AP. Always nice to see a "good news" story.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=829>

The issue that won't go away

May 11, 2010

It's early, but I'm already prepared to submit my nomination for the stupidest headline of the month:

[Abortion could be sleeper issue in Supreme Court confirmation process](#)

Sleeper issue? When in the last 37 years has abortion not been a dominant issue—no, *the* dominant issue—in every discussion of every Supreme Court nomination?

Our political leaders, both Democrats and Republicans, assure us that for now, at least, the abortion issue is settled. There is no chance that the *Roe v. Wade* decision will be overturned by the Supreme Court as it is currently composed. The nomination of Elena Kagan—or of any other jurist likely to win the nod from President Obama—will not change that prognosis. Yet they keep talking about the issue. The media, following their lead, continue the conversation.

But now we've reached a new watershed. The *Washington Post*, which passes for the newspaper of record in the nation's capital, carries a notice that abortion will be a “sleeper” issue. The nation's leading journalists are poised to feign surprise when the question comes up again. Haven't we already settled it?

When my children were young, if they kept asking questions about an issue that we had already discussed and settled, I sometimes attributed their curiosity to a nagging conscience.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=644>

Does abstinence cause pregnancy? The Times makes the argument

January 28, 2010

The pregnancy rate among American teenagers (aged 15-19) rose in 2006—the last year for which statistics are available—after a decade of decline. The increase was relatively small (3%), and may indicate only a temporary reversal of the positive trend. Still the statistic is cause for concern.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Tamar Lewin provides the party line in the first paragraph of her story, announcing that the new data are “likely to intensify the debate over federal financing for abstinence-only sex education.”

That didn't take long, did it? We have one isolated piece of information: an uptick in teen pregnancies. We could probably come up with dozens of hypotheses to explain the trend (if indeed it is a trend). Maybe it was a difference in the way the data were compiled. Maybe it was burst of teen sexual activity. Maybe it was sun spots. Who knows? But Tamar Lewin offers her preferred theory right in her lede: it was that old devil abstinence education.

Leaving aside the rather obvious fact that abstinence doesn't cause pregnancy, let's take a closer look at the facts.

The federal government has been financing abstinence education since the Clinton administration. So if these programs lead to an increase in teen-pregnancy rates, you'd expect the statistics to show an increase in pregnancy beginning around 1990. But that's not what the numbers show. On the contrary, teen-pregnancy rates began dropping around 1990, after an alarming rise over the previous 20 years.

Now what had been happening during those earlier years, 1970-1990? The government was heavily subsidizing “traditional” sex-ed programs, of the King Condom variety. And teen pregnancy rates had been climbing. Hmm. Interesting. Then, at roughly the same time that Uncle Sam began supporting abstinence education as well, the pregnancy rates began to decline. Hmm. More interesting.

Should we conclude that the federal support for abstinence education caused the decline in teen pregnancy rates? Probably not; at least the data provided in this particular story don't support that conclusion. Just because Tamar Lewin jumps to a conclusion,

that doesn't mean we should do the same. There was a trend. We don't yet know the reasons for the trend. What we do know, however, is that the timing of the trend weighs heavily against the suggestion that federal support for abstinence education leads to a rise in teen pregnancy.

To tell the truth (which the *Times* story does not do), it's unlikely that federal subsidies for abstinence education would have any powerful impact, good or bad, on the overall pregnancy rate. Because, you see, the federal support for abstinence education was never more than a fraction of the support provided for the old King Condom programs. At its peak during the Bush II administration, funding for abstinence education represented only about \$1 for every \$4 given to "safe sex" programs.

Still, even \$1 given to an abstinence program is a dollar that isn't available for Planned Parenthood and its allies. Having enjoyed a monopoly on sex-ed funding for so long, the PP lobby has always resented the abstinence proponents.

If your information came only from the *New York Times* report, you could be forgiven for thinking that the federal government supported only abstinence education, eschewing all other forms of sex education. Not so. The safe-sex programs get dollars while the chastity-oriented programs get quarters. If federal support is having any impact, then, it's logical to start with the assumption that the safe-sex programs account for most of that impact.

Tamar Lewin starts from a different assumption, and it's easy to understand why:

While it is difficult to pinpoint precisely how different factors influence teenage sexual behavior, some experts speculate that the rise in teenage pregnancy might be partly attributable to the \$150 million a year of federal financing for sex education that emphasized abstinence until marriage, avoiding all mention of the possible benefits of contraception.

And who are these "experts" who offer such speculation? In the next paragraph Lewin provides a single quote, from that noted "expert" Cecile Richards, the president of the Planned Parenthood Federation. It's funny that Lewin couldn't find a single witness to testify in favor of the abstinence programs. Maybe the people who run those programs didn't answer her calls. Come to think of it, if I were in their shoes, I wouldn't answer her, either.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=603>

Icy Vatican reception damaging to Pelosi

February 19, 2009

Did you see the photo of Nancy Pelosi with Pope Benedict XVI during her visit to the Vatican yesterday?

No, you didn't. There was no photo, because there was no photographer on hand when they met.

The Speaker of the House went to Rome hoping for a photo op. A smiling picture of herself with the Pontiff would have done a great deal to ease the tensions between Pelosi and the American hierarchy: tensions caused by her unswerving defense of legal abortion. That photo would have burnished her credentials as the “ardent Catholic” she claims to be.

But there was no photo op. After a month of disastrous public-relations gaffes, the Vatican handled this meeting quite nicely. The meeting was held in private. Without violating diplomatic protocol the Vatican managed to convey an unmistakable coolness about the encounter. (The [New York Times](#), picking up the proper nuance, reported: “In a statement, the Vatican said Benedict ‘briefly greeted’ Ms. Pelosi....”) Best of all, the Pope—who rarely issues public statements after meetings with visiting dignitaries—followed up on the meeting with a [clear public statement](#) reiterating the duty of Catholic politicians to protect the dignity of life.

Undoubtedly frustrated by this adroit handling of her visit, Madame Speaker issued her own statement, saying that she had spoken with the Pope about her earlier visit to the Vatican. (And if he plays his cards right, maybe the Holy Father will have a chance to watch the Pelosi family's home movies?) She said that she had also spoken to the Pontiff about world hunger and global warming. Perhaps those topics were on her agenda, but it is significant that they were not mentioned in the terse Vatican statement. There was no happy-talk from the Holy See: no mention of shared concerns and mutual interests, nothing that would distract attention from the one essential point that the Pope wanted to make.

Pelosi ignored that point in her own statement. But reporters were not distracted. George Weigel was the first to call attention to the huge disparity between the two public

accounts of the meeting. Writing for [National Review Online](#), he asked: “Were They at the Same Meeting?” [Fox News](#) agreed that, based on the two statements, “it appears the pope and the politician attended two different get-togethers.” And *USA Today’s* religion blogger Cathy Lynn Grossman [took up the refrain](#): “Were they in the same room?”

Needless to say, no one was questioning the Vatican’s version of the encounter. Reporters realized that Pelosi was doing her best to put a positive spin on a damaging story. She wanted some affirmation from the Pope; instead she received a clear rebuke.

If the Speaker had had her way, the photo-op with the Pope could have been cited as evidence that a Catholic politician can legitimately support legal abortion. Instead the headlines told exactly the opposite story:

- *Pope tells Nancy Pelosi life must be protected* (AP)
- *Pope raises abortion at meeting with Pelosi* (CNN International)
- *Visiting Pope, Pelosi Hears a Call to Protect Life* (New York Times)

Nicely done.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=364>

The Pope's 'green' message: not standard environmentalism

January 14, 2010

After Pope [Benedict XVI delivered his “State of the World” address](#) to the Vatican diplomatic corps on January 11, your local newspaper probably carried a headline like the one atop [the story in the *New York Times*](#): “Pope Denounces Failure to Forge New Climate Treaty.” The AP story began:

Pope Benedict XVI denounced the failure of world leaders to agree to a new climate change treaty in Copenhagen last month, saying Monday that world peace depends on safeguarding God’s creation.

BBC carried [a very similar headline](#): “Pope Benedict XVI lambasts Copenhagen failure.” And *Time* magazine, also running with the [AP coverage](#), followed suit with its headline text: “Pope Denounces Lack of New Climate Treaty.” You might have concluded, from the press coverage, that the Holy Father’s speech was devoted mostly to the Copenhagen conference. But that conclusion would have been wrong. In his [full 3,000-word address](#), Pope Benedict spent barely 100 words on the climate-change summit. It was a part of his message, but only a small part. However, it was the part that the secular media wanted to hear.

Benedict XVI, the mass media tell us, is a “green Pope.” That description is undeniably accurate, in the sense that this Pontiff has frequently spoken about the need to care for the environment. Twice in quick succession—in his message for the World Day of Peace on January 11, and now in his address to the diplomatic corps just 10 days later—he has made that argument forcefully to representatives of the world’s political leadership. But the “green” message preached by Pope Benedict is very different from mainstream environmentalism. Unfortunately most secular reporters, deaf to the spiritual content of the Pope’s message, miss the distinction.

Reporters always simplify stories. They are regularly called upon to sum up complicated ideas in a few paragraphs—in the case of headline writers, in a few words—and their work is much easier if they can classify an idea quickly, place an argument in a convenient pigeonhole, and pronounce the story done. Thus the Pope is an environmentalist, and environmentalists were disappointed by the results of the Copenhagen summit, therefore the Pope was disappointed by that summit. QED.

Again, that message is accurate as far as it goes. The Pope *did* express disappointment about the Copenhagen results. But that was only a very small part of his

message to the diplomatic corps.

I know, from my own personal experience, how often the media oversimplify a speaker's message. Ten years ago I was running for the US Senate (coincidentally, for the same seat that is now the focus of a [hotly contested special election](#)). I was running as a pro-life candidate, and so most press coverage of my campaign stressed the abortion issue. But it was frustrating to deliver speeches that address many other issues—nuclear weapons, the income tax, gun control, immigration—and then read press accounts that mentioned nothing but my opposition to legal abortion. Those accounts were accurate, insofar as I never gave a stump speech without including the pro-life argument. But I was appalled to realize that reporters were not really listening to my arguments, but only waiting for the “money quote” that would fit into the story they already planned to write.

So it was with the Pope's “State of the World” address. When the Holy Father opened with the remark that a “self-centered and materialistic way of thinking” today “endangers creation,” most reporters were quite ready to classify his speech as a standard environmentalist argument. When he mentioned the Copenhagen summit, they had their “money quote,” and the story was all but complete.

Most of the world's people—including most of the world's Catholics—learned about the Pope's talk not by reading [the actual text](#), or even the official Vatican summary, but by hearing the reports that filtered through the secular news media. Secular reporters tend to read all events in secular terms—in political terms—and so they gravitated toward a politicized reading of the Pope's words.

To complicate matters, the Vatican's public-relations efforts are notoriously inept, unable to focus reporters' attention on the most important themes of papal teaching. Furthermore, the Vatican officials most likely to speak with reporters are the ones most inclined to put their own political “spin” on the Pope's words. The net result is coverage that glosses over the most critical aspects of the Pope's message.

What was the essential thrust of that message? Pope Benedict made his argument for environmental stewardship in the context of an argument about the dignity of human life and human nature. “It is in man's respect for himself that his sense of responsibility for creation is shown,” he told the diplomatic corps. “As Saint Thomas Aquinas has taught, man represents all that is most noble in the universe.” Now that message is the polar opposite of the extreme environmentalist line, which views mankind as a threat to the earth. Drawing on a Judeo-Christian tradition that traces back to Genesis, the Pope said that God set man up as steward over creation, to fill the earth and subdue it. The Christian is naturally an environmentalist, because he wants to fulfill God's plan.

Pope Benedict went further. Following God's plan means respecting natural law, he said; it means honoring the lessons that are inscribed in human nature. So he explained that a reverence for life, and a determination to support marriage and the family, are also signs of respect for God's creation. A few reporters caught that message, but then, predictably enough, expressed the Pope's argument in crudely political terms. A [Wall Street Journal account](#), written with ill-concealed sarcasm, began: "Pope Benedict linked the Catholic Church's opposition to gay marriage to concern about the environment, suggesting that laws undermining 'the differences between the sexes' were threats to creation."

"Creatures differ from one another and can be protected, or endangered in different ways, as we know from daily experience. One such attack comes from laws or proposals, which, in the name of fighting discrimination, strike at the biological basis of the difference between the sexes," he said. "I am thinking, for example, of certain countries in Europe or North and South America." The headline on a [Reuters story](#) simplified still further: "Pope says gay marriage threat to creation."

Again, those accounts are not inaccurate; the Pope did make those arguments. But by presenting the Pope's point in its barest simplified form—virtually as a slogan—the reports gave readers the grossly misleading impression that the Holy Father was delivering a political speech. He was not. Pope Benedict was addressing a political audience—the ambassadors representing the world's governments to the Holy See—but he was delivering a spiritual message. I wrote above that the Pope began with an expression of concern for welfare of creation. That is not entirely accurate. The first words of the papal address were about "celebration of the birth of the Incarnate Word;" the Pontiff invited all the world to join in that celebration.

In the annual "State of the World" address, a Pope traditionally tours the world's trouble spots, offering observations about all the challenges that face political leaders. Pope Benedict's address this year was no exception. He did not confine himself to the topics of environment and gay marriage. He also spoke about Darfur and the Congo; about peace in the Middle East and the drug traffic in Latin America; about nuclear weaponry and global hunger; about secularism in Europe and natural disasters in Asia. His thoughts on all those topics, regrettably, did not fit into the story line that most reporters chose.

There were a few exceptions. In Italy, Sandro Magister of *L'Espresso* [saw the Pope's address as an endorsement of three causes](#): an ecology of nature, but above all of man; a positive secularity; and religious freedom. Magister's summary was not perfect, but it did accurately reflect the breadth and depth of the Pope's address, in a way that no

American secular reporter matched.

Because the Pope's address came through to the general public in such grossly oversimplified forms, many readers have expressed discontent about what the Pontiff said—or, perhaps, what they *think* he said. One recalls the words of Bishop Fulton Sheen: "There are not more than 100 people in the world who truly hate the Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they perceive to be the Catholic Church."

Yes, Pope Benedict did express dismay about the paltry results of the Copenhagen summit. But the Pope's speech cannot be reduced to that one passage. (In fact, the Pope's views on climate change should be a matter of only passing interest, even to loyal Catholics. His teaching authority extends to matters of faith and morals, not to questions of scientific fact.) The Pontiff is not committing the teaching authority of the Catholic Church to a political cause.

Near the conclusion of his address to the diplomatic corps, Pope Benedict offered his own summary of the essential message: "There is so much suffering in our world, and human selfishness continues in many ways to harm creation," he said. "For this reason, the yearning for salvation which affects all creation is that much more intense and present in the hearts of all men and women, believers and non-believers alike." He also offered a solution—one that goes far above and beyond any political platform. The key, the Pope said, is to respect the nature of man: to recognize and embrace God's plan for the human race. He concluded:

May the light and strength of Jesus help us to respect human ecology, in the knowledge that natural ecology will likewise benefit, since the book of nature is one and indivisible.

Ars gratia artis

November 23, 2009

Why did Pope Benedict meet with artists last Saturday? [A Reuters account](#) offers a partial explanation:

After a number of spats between the Vatican and artists in recent years, including a controversy surrounding writer Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, the latest overture to the artistic world is being driven by the Vatican's new culture commissar, Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi.

Yes, there have been “spats between the Vatican and artists.” These “spats” occurred when avant-garde artists went out of their way to insult the Church and/or the Catholic faith, and the Vatican, recognizing the insults, denounced them. If apologies are necessary, the gatekeepers of the art world should be apologizing to the Church for having sponsored so many puerile anti-Catholic tirades. But the Vatican—ready as usual to make the first conciliatory move, and to go more than halfway—issued an invitation at which the Pope did not speak at all about past conflicts, but gave his unqualified approval to true artistic expression.

But I almost forgot Dan Brown. The author of *The Da Vinci Code* wasn't in attendance at the papal audience, and he is, Reuters tells us, one of the artists with whom the Vatican has recently been at loggerheads. To be honest, I don't ordinarily think of the authors of spy novels, murder mysteries, and thrillers as “artists.” Even leaving aside Brown's tendency to rewrite Catholic history and undermine Catholic dogma, he doesn't belong in the company of the serious artists who were seen in the Sistine Chapel on Saturday.

And when I refer to those serious artists, I don't mean only the living. The [New York Times described](#) the Saturday meeting:

Sitting before Michelangelo's “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel, after a choir sang music by Palestrina,..

Not a subtle reminder, but an effective one. The Vatican sponsored Michelangelo and Palestrina—to name just a few great artists among thousands. The notion that artists could be inspired and supported by the Church is not just an interesting hypothesis; it's an established fact that has been demonstrated again and again. The novelty of our era, in fact, is that so few artists have taken up the challenge to explore the religious themes that

provided such an abundant lode of rich material for their forebears.

Why did the Pope meet with artists? To remind them.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=552>

A ‘scandal’ the Vatican should love

June 21, 2010

With all the nasty reports in circulation these days, you’d think a weary Vatican PR team would snap at the opportunity for a change of pace. Here’s the recipe:

- a light, funny, personal-interest story, on a subject that Italian columnists would love;
- a story that doesn’t involve any major issues of faith or morals;
- a story that doesn’t endanger anyone’s reputation (although it could boost the reputation of a certain establishment in Rome);
- a story that makes the Pope sound very human, without any damage to his legitimate authority;
- a story that adds to the rich treasury of legends about the city of Rome.

And [here’s the story](#): According to a Roman gossip columnist, on the evening of June 14, Al Passetto di Borgo, a restaurant just a few steps from St. Peter’s Square, was closed to the public, as usual on a Monday evening. But, the columnist says, the restaurant opened to serve one very special customer: Pope Benedict XVI.

The Vatican denies the story. But let’s not let that denial stop us. Face it: the Vatican denies things reflexively. The press office hands out information on a “need to know” basis, and nobody needs to know where the Pope had dinner last Monday night. For that matter, the people who are issuing the denials might not know the facts here; if the Pope was hoping to slip out of the Vatican undetected, it stands to reason that he wouldn’t inform his whole staff.

The restaurant owner denies it. But that means very little. If he was asked to keep things quiet, no doubt he would. I’m still not convinced.

It was a waiter who reportedly tipped off the gossip columnist. To me that sounds entirely plausible. Waiters, too, rely on tips.

The background story is not only plausible, but thoroughly endearing. The streets of Rome were nearly deserted that night; the *Azzurri* were playing Paraguay at their World Cup opener, and soccer fans—a category that embraces a large proportion of the Italian

population—were glued to the tube. Maybe Pope Benedict, who is not a big sports fan, saw an opportunity for a rare night outside the Vatican walls. Or maybe, better still, his ordinary cook *is* a big soccer fan and wanted the night off. It's an established fact that Al Passetto di Borgo was one of his favorite restaurants before the conclave of 2005. The facts all fit.

Dining out at a restaurant is Something That Is Not Done by Roman Pontiffs. But really, why not? Long after the fact, we learned that Pope John Paul II would occasionally slip out of the apostolic palace incognito for a day on the ski slopes. Those outings didn't hurt anyone, and dinner at a restaurant is a much safer activity than skiing.

Is the story true? I sincerely hope so.

Next time you're in Rome, why not stop at Al Passetto di Borgo, order the sole, and with a nod toward the apostolic palace, say that you want it done just the way "he" likes it? If you catch a gleam in the waiter's eye, that's confirmation enough.

Better yet, don't wait for confirmation. Just pass along the rumor. Yes, I know that's irresponsible journalism. But this story is too much fun to pass up.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=666>

Part V: A Story Becomes an Obsession

Why is John Paul II on trial in the media today?

April 27, 2011

Do you remember the death of Pope John Paul II? Could you ever forget it?

For several days, during that first week of April in 2005, the attention of the entire world was riveted on the Vatican. Television networks kept vigil during the Pope's last hours, and when he finally died, there was a universal sense that the world had lost a great man. The reaction from crowd in St. Peter's Square was odd, yet appropriate: after a moment's hush, the people broke into spontaneous, quiet applause, paying homage to a life well lived.

Never before, in all of human history, have so many people paid attention to a man's death. Never before has the mourning been so universal. In the days after the Pope's death, when the Vatican moved on to his funeral, the reverential awe for John Paul II remained. When the congregation at the funeral took up the cry of "*Santo subito!*" everyone who heard it understood. The 20th century had given the world a series of giant historical figures, most of them morally flawed or even downright evil. But here was a man worthy of admiration: a man who, while human, was easily recognized for his essential goodness, for his outsized contributions to the common good—for what the Catholic Church calls his "heroic virtue."

Check back in the news archives for April 2005, and you will find only a few token criticisms of Pope John Paul II, most of them buried within the context of laudatory stories. The newspaper stories, summing up his prodigious accomplishments, were overwhelmingly favorable. Apart from the most inveterate critics of Catholicism (including a few who still identify themselves as Catholics), columnists did not question the overall record of the deceased Pontiff. The coverage of his funeral was solemn and respectful. The retrospective essays were appreciative.

Now, six years later, as the Catholic Church prepares to beatify John Paul II—to act on those *Santo subito* demands—the media have turned critical. Scan the news today, and you will find dozens of columnists questioning whether the late Pope should be beatified. The Vatican has moved forward too quickly, they say, and the sex-abuse crisis casts shadows on the legacy of John Paul II.

Why this remarkable change of perspective? Why has the near-universal adulation for John Paul II changed, in a few years, to widespread skepticism about his pontificate?

To some extent, the skepticism is a natural (if not healthy) function of today's media world. Reporters need something to talk about, and controversy catches attention. At the time of his death and burial, the life of John Paul II was a warm human-interest story. Now the royal wedding provides a more picturesque "feel-good" story, and the Pope's legacy is left on the laboratory table, ready for dissection. But there's more to it than that. People who have never before shown any interest in the process by which the Church declares saints are now weighing in on the pace of the late Pope's cause. More ominously, reporters are asking, again and again, whether John Paul II bears the blame for the sex-abuse scandal. Let's focus on that latter question.

What do we know now, that we didn't know in 2005, about Pope John Paul's handling of the sex-abuse crisis? Not much. The details of the scandal were fresh in our minds in 2005. For Europeans the shock may be greater now, since the major revelations have been more recent. For Americans the wounds are not quite so raw. We had begun to grasp the dimensions of the problem in 2002; by 2005 the corruption had been thoroughly exposed.

We have learned, in the intervening years, that some of the prelates in the Roman Curia were ready and willing to cover up sexual abuse in the 1970s and 1980s. But no evidence has emerged to suggest that John Paul II himself was involved in the cover-up, or even aware of it. We have learned that the Pope was duped by Marcial Maciel. But many thousands of other Catholics were duped, too, by that unique and dangerous man. We have learned that John Paul II didn't run a very tight ship at the Vatican. But we knew that in 2005; in fact, we knew it all too well by 1985.

So again, why has criticism of the late Pope come to the fore in 2011, when the world viewed him so favorably in 2005? The answer to that question, I think, lies in the way the discussion of the sex-abuse scandal has evolved.

In 2000, as the first outcroppings of the scandal appeared in public view, most observers were rightly outraged at the priests who had molested children. In 2002, when the extent of the hierarchical cover-up became evident, we were rightly outraged at the bishops who had protected the abusers. We realized, to our horror, that the corruption had involved not just a few twisted priests, but also dozens of complicit bishops. As the years have passed, critics of the Church (again, including some within the fold) have sought to broaden the scope of the censure still further, to condemn the entire Catholic Church.

By 2005, lawyers for sex-abuse victims had won billions of dollars in damages from

the Church in America, driving dioceses toward bankruptcy. Then the most ambitious among them, led by Jeffrey Anderson, set their sights on a new target: the Vatican. With the help of sympathetic reporters, they too have worked to create the impression that the cover-up of sexual abuse was a worldwide strategy, dictated by Vatican leaders. Thus fingers are pointed at the Pope. But where is the evidence to support these charges? When John Paul II became aware of the cover-up prior to 2002, he summoned the leaders of the American hierarchy to Rome and denounced the corruption in clear, ringing terms. He cannot be blamed for abuses that occurred before he became Roman Pontiff; he cannot be held responsible for the malfeasance of other bishops, which occurred without his knowledge and which he denounced when he became aware of it.

Six years ago the mass media joined in the worldwide public acclaim for John Paul II. Were they wrong to do so? Because if the praise was merited in 2005, and no important new evidence has been discovered to stain the late Pope's reputation, the same homage is due to John Paul II today.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=799>

Editorial misfire

October 23, 2009

An [editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer](#) complains that by filing for bankruptcy, the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware has stalled the progress of sex-abuse lawsuits against the Church. The paper argues that the diocese should have allowed the suits to continue, thereby bringing out all the evidence against Church officials.

The *Inquirer* also endorses laws that have extended the statute of limitations for sex-abuse suits, and chastises Catholic prelates who have opposed those laws:

But church officials across the nation continue to fight statute moratoriums with specious claims that victims' lawsuits will lead to parish closings, and several dioceses have resorted to the dubious bankruptcy claim.

“Specious” claims? The wording of the editorial suggests that perhaps the *Inquirer* has not noticed the thousands of parish closings that have been carried out in the past ten years, in parishes all across America.

The decision to seek bankruptcy protection is a controversial one; powerful arguments can be made against that option. This isn't one of them.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=522>

The trail that doesn't lead to the Vatican

March 05, 2010

For more than a decade, some journalists have been trying to trace the responsibility for the sex-abuse crisis to the Vatican, and preferably to the Pope. They haven't found a connection yet, but they're still trying. At times their efforts would be comical, if they weren't so mean-spirited.

Take for example yesterday's headline stories about the [Vatican usher who is suspected of running a homosexual prostitution ring](#). Does it look bad? Absolutely. Is the story a grave embarrassment to the Holy See? Of course. But even if he was (repeat, "was") one of the "Gentlemen of his Holiness," Angelo Balducci had absolutely no influence on Vatican policies. In one report—which, I'm happy to say, I can no longer find online—the suspected pimp was described as a "key aide" to the Pontiff, who helped Benedict XVI organize important events. That's true, I suppose, insofar as the Pope does rely on people to set up chairs before his public audiences and to escort people to their seats; in that sense an usher does help to organize events. But the Pope's relationship with Balducci is like your relationship with the teenager who bags your groceries: you recognize him, may even know his name, but have no idea at all what he's doing with his free time.

Then today's newspapers bring another embarrassing story, about [sexual abuse at the boys choir in Regensburg](#), Germany. Here the story does come closer to the Holy Father, since his brother was director of that choir—although it's important to note that there is no evidence that Msgr. Georg Ratzinger had any knowledge of the alleged abuse. The [New York Times](#), which should know better, helpfully added that during the time period in question, the future Pope Benedict was also living in Regensburg, teaching theology at the university there. Right: the future Pope was living in the city in which a crime allegedly occurred. And the *New York Times* had offices in Manhattan at the time of the 9/11 terrorist strike. So what?

(An updated version of the *New York Times* story has removed the reference to the Pope's tenure in Regensburg: a step in the right direction.)

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=623>

The effort to implicate the Pope

March 12, 2010

Count on the London *Times* to offer the most sensational coverage of a news story involving the Catholic Church. The headline on [today's report by Richard Owen](#) screams:

Pope knew priest was paedophile but allowed him to continue with ministry

That's grossly misleading, downright irresponsible. The reporter runs ahead of his evidence—standard procedure for a *Times* journalist—but even Richard Owen does not allege anything to justify the headline.

Here's what we know: While the Pope was Archbishop of Munich, a priest there was accused of sexual abuse. He was pulled out of ministry and sent off for counseling. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger was involved in the decision to remove the priest from his parish assignment—got that? *remove him.* [**Editor's note:** *The preceding sentences are not accurate. Actually the facts provide an even stronger defense of the Pontiff. See the update below.*] He also approved a decision to house the priest in a rectory while he was undergoing counseling. We don't know, at this point, whether the priest could have been sent to a residential facility, to take him out of circulation entirely. That might have been a more prudent move. We don't know whether he was kept under close observation. But we do know that he was not involved in active ministry.

Then the vicar general of the Munich archdiocese made the decision to let the accused priest help out at a parish. That vicar general, Msgr. Gerhard Gruber, says that he made that decision on his own, without consulting the cardinal. The future Pope never knew about it, he testifies. Several years later, long after Cardinal Ratzinger had moved to a new assignment at the Vatican, the priest was again accused of sexual abuse.

A grievous mistake was made in this case; that much is clear now, and the vicar general has sorrowfully taken responsibility for the error. Could you say that the future Pontiff should have been more vigilant? Perhaps. But to suggest that he made the decision to put a pedophile back in circulation is an outrageous distortion of the facts.

The [AP story](#) carries a very different headline:

Pope's former diocese admits error over priest

That's not so eye-catching. But the headline fits the facts.

Update

After learning more about this case, I realize that the analysis above is not quite accurate, and the effort to implicate the Pope is even more far-fetched than I had originally thought. The accused was not a priest of the Munich archdiocese, but a priest from the Diocese of Essen, who had been sent to a facility in Munich for counseling. So the then-Cardinal Ratzinger was not responsible for his treatment; his only connection with the case was his decision to let the priest stay in a rectory in the Munich archdiocese while he was undergoing treatment there. There is no evidence that the Pope was aware the accused priest was an accused pedophile; he was evidently informed only that the priest had been guilty of sexual improprieties, and probably concluded that he was engaged in homosexual activities with young men.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=624>

The Pope and the Murphy case: what the New York Times story didn't tell you

March 25, 2010

Today's [front-page story in the New York Times](#) suggests that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), under the direction of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, failed to act against a Wisconsin priest who was accused of molesting scores of boys at a school for the deaf.

Is the story damaging? Yes. Should the Vatican have acted faster? Yes. Should the accused priest have been laicized? In all probability, Yes again.

Nevertheless, before assigning all blame to the Vatican, consider these factors:

1. The allegations of abuse by Father Lawrence Murphy began in 1955 and continued in 1974, according to the Times account. The Vatican was first notified in 1996: 40 years after Church officials in Wisconsin were first made aware of the problem. Local Church leaders could have taken action in the 1950s. They didn't.

2. The Vatican, following the standard procedures required by canon law, kept its own inquiries confidential. But the CDF never barred other investigations. Local Church officials could have given police all the information they had about the allegations against Murphy. Indeed they could have informed police 40 years earlier. They didn't.

3. Milwaukee's Archbishop Cousins could have suspended Father Murphy from priestly ministry in 1974, when he was evidently convinced that the priest was guilty of gross misconduct. He didn't. Instead he transferred the predator priest to a new diocese, allowing him to continue pastoral work giving him access to other innocent young people. And as if that weren't enough, later Archbishop Weakland made sure that there was no "paper trail." There was certainly a cover-up in this case. It was in Milwaukee, not in Rome.

4. Having called the Vatican's attention to Murphy's case, Archbishop Weakland apparently wanted an immediate response, and was unhappy that the CDF took 8 months to respond. But again, the Milwaukee archdiocese had waited decades to take this action. Because the Milwaukee archdiocese had waited so

long to take action, the canonical statute of limitations had become an important factor in the Vatican's decision to advise against an ecclesiastical trial.

5. In a plea for mercy addressed to Cardinal Ratzinger, Father Murphy said that he had repented his misdeeds, was guilty of no recent misconduct, and was in failing health. Earlier this month Msgr. Charles Scicluna, the chief Vatican prosecutor in sex-abuse cases, [explained that in many cases involving elderly or ailing priests](#), the CDF chooses to forego a full canonical trial, instead ordering the priest to remove himself from public ministry and devote his remaining days to penance and prayer. This was, in effect, the final result of the Vatican's inquiry in this case; Father Murphy died just months later.

6. The correspondence makes it clear that Archbishop Weakland took action not because he wanted to protect the public from an abusive priest, but because he wanted to avoid the huge public outcry that he predicted would emerge if Murphy was not disciplined. In 1996, when the archbishop made that prediction, the public outcry would—and should—have been focused on the Milwaukee archdiocese, if it had materialized. Now, 14 years later, a much more intense public outcry is focused on the Vatican. The anger is justifiable, but it is misdirected.

This is a story about the abject failure of the Milwaukee archdiocese to discipline a dangerous priest, and the tardy effort by Archbishop Weakland—who would soon become the subject of a major scandal himself—to shift responsibility to Rome.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=629>

Holding the New York Times accountable

March 31, 2010

“It doesn’t seem right that the Catholic Church is spending Holy Week practicing the unholy art of spin,” writes Maureen Dowd, in [another of her toxic columns](#) for the *New York Times*.

Well, Maureen, the Church wouldn’t be answering charges this week if irresponsible journalists weren’t making unsupported claims, and writing vile columns based on smirks and cheap shots. It’s not “spin” when you try to clear the record after newspaper reports have muddied it. “Spin” is when you churn out opinions without basing them on facts. You’d know about that, wouldn’t you, Maureen?

My son Joseph, [writing for the American Spectator](#), notes that of the two *New York Times* assaults on the Pope—one about the Milwaukee case, the other about the Munich case—the Milwaukee case [has been thoroughly debunked](#) while the Munich case is now [hanging by a thread](#). It’s possible—no longer probable, but still possible—that there could be some justifiable criticism of the Pope for his handling of that Munich case. So real journalists (as opposed to calumny specialists) might want to continue prying into that story. Go for it, says Joseph:

Again, if the *Times* is on to something, the pope must be held accountable. But if not, the *Times* must be held similarly accountable for the damage it’s done.

I’d make that deal. When all the facts are out, I’m betting that the Pope will be thoroughly exonerated. Then the *Times* should have the decency to print a front-page headline: “We Were Wrong.” And Maureen Dowd should do the same. But I won’t hold my breath waiting.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=630>

Journalists abandon standards to attack the Pope

April 10, 2010

We're off and running once again, with another completely phony story that purports to implicate Pope Benedict XVI in the protection of abusive priests.

The “exclusive” story released by AP yesterday, which has been dutifully passed along now by scores of major media outlets, would never have seen the light of day if normal journalistic standards had been in place. Careful editors should have asked a series of probing questions, and in every case the answer to those questions would have shown that the story had no “legs.”

First to repeat the bare-bones version of the story: in November 1985, then-Cardinal Ratzinger signed a letter deferring a decision on the laicization of Father Stephen Kiesle, a California priest who had been accused of molesting boys.

Now the key questions:

- Was Cardinal Ratzinger responding to the complaints of priestly pedophilia? **No**. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which the future Pontiff headed, did not have jurisdiction for pedophile priests until 2001. The cardinal was weighing a request for laicization of Kiesle.
- Had Oakland's Bishop John Cummins sought to laicize Kiesle as punishment for his misconduct? **No**. Kiesle himself asked to be released from the priesthood. The bishop supported the wayward priest's application.
- Was the request for laicization denied? **No**. Eventually, in 1987, the Vatican approved Kiesle's dismissal from the priesthood.
- Did Kiesle abuse children again before he was laicized? To the best of our knowledge, **No**. The next complaints against him arose in 2002: 15 years after he was dismissed from the priesthood.
- Did Cardinal Ratzinger's reluctance to make a quick decision mean that Kiesle remained in active ministry? **No**. Bishop Cummins had the authority to suspend the predator-priest, and in fact he had placed him on an extended leave of absence long before the application for laicization was entered.
- Would quicker laicization have protected children in California? **No**. Cardinal

Ratzinger did not have the power to put Kiesle behind bars. If Kiesle had been defrocked in 1985 instead of 1987, he would have remained at large, thanks to a light sentence from the California courts. As things stood, he remained at large. He was not engaged in parish ministry and had no special access to children.

- Did the Vatican cover up evidence of Kiesle’s predatory behavior? **No**. The civil courts of California destroyed that evidence after the priest completed a sentence of probation—before the case ever reached Rome.

So to review: This was not a case in which a bishop wanted to discipline his priest and the Vatican official demurred. This was not a case in which a priest remained active in ministry, and the Vatican did nothing to protect the children under his pastoral care. This was not a case in which the Vatican covered up evidence of a priest’s misconduct. This was a case in which a priest asked to be released from his vows, and the Vatican—which had been flooded by such requests throughout the 1970s—wanted to consider all such cases carefully. In short, if you’re looking for evidence of a sex-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, this case is irrelevant.

We Americans know what a sex-abuse crisis looks like. The scandal erupts when evidence emerges that bishops have protected abusive priests, kept them active in parish assignments, covered up evidence of the charges against them, and lied to their people. There is no such evidence in this or any other case involving Pope Benedict XVI.

Competent reporters, when dealing with a story that involves special expertise, seek information from experts in that field. Capable journalists following this story should have sought out canon lawyers to explain the 1985 document—not merely relied on the highly biased testimony of civil lawyers who have lodged multiple suits against the Church. If they had understood the case, objective reporters would have recognized that they had no story. But in this case, reporters for the major media outlets are far from objective.

The *New York Times*—which touched off this feeding frenzy with two error-riddled front-page reports—seized on the latest “scoop” by AP to say that the 1985 document exemplified:

...the sort of delay that is fueling a renewed sexual abuse scandal in the church that has focused on whether the future pope moved quickly enough to remove known pedophiles from the priesthood, despite pleas from American bishops.

Here we have a complete rewriting of history. Earlier in this decade, American newspapers exposed the sad truth that many American bishops had kept pedophile

priests in active ministry. Now the *Times*, which played an active role in exposing that scandal, would have us believe that the American bishops were striving to rid the priesthood of the predators, and the Vatican resisted!

No, what is “fueling a renewed sexual abuse scandal” is a media frenzy. There is a scandal here, indeed, but it’s not the scandal you’re reading about in the mass media. The scandal is the complete collapse of journalistic standards in the handling of this story.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=632>

Tough competition in the media-bias department

July 07, 2010

A German rag, *Der Spiegel* has [produced a story](#) that rivals [the coverage of the *New York Times*](#) in its flagrant bias against Pope Benedict and the Catholic Church.

The headline provides sets the tone: **Pope Benedict XVI Lashes Out at Secular Justice**. You get the message: the Pope is opposed to justice. Subtle. If you read past the headline, you see that the Pope really didn't "lash out" at secular justice at all. He objected to the aggressive police raid on the Belgian bishops' headquarters. But as even the *Spiegel* story concedes, he "argued in favor of cooperating with the secular justice system." So the headline is roughly 180° off from the facts contained in the report.

It goes downhill from there. How much misinformation can you cram into a single paragraph? Let's see:

Even in the sixth year of Benedict's pontificate, the Vatican has yet to provide the national churches with a globally binding policy for dealing with the perpetrators of abuse. It has not said how, under church law, abusive clergymen are to be reported and punished, nor how the Catholic Church will cooperate with secular justice systems.

It is the sixth year of this pontificate. Other than that, every statement in the paragraph is wrong.

1. There are no "national churches" within Catholicism; there are national episcopal conferences, but the Church is universal.
2. There is a globally binding policy for dealing with abusive priests. It is spelled out in the 2001 Vatican document *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*, which was partially revised in 2003.
3. Church law does specify how abusive clergymen are to be reported; their cases are handled by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.
4. The Vatican has promised cooperation with secular law-enforcement officials,

and directs bishops to report abuse to the proper authorities.

So we know that Der Spiegel is indifferent to the facts. The journal is equally disinterested in the principles of logic. Just below the spectacularly inaccurate statements above, we read:

This persistent refusal to give local bishops greater freedom in dealing with cases of abuse partially explains why an ever increasing number of cases are surfacing in Brazil and Italy—and now also in Belgium involving bishops attempting to resolve cases of abuse their own way, without reporting them to the Vatican or state prosecutors.

1. Just a few sentences back, the authors were arguing that the Vatican was at fault for not establishing a “globally binding” policy. Now the complaint is that local bishops didn’t have enough freedom. Did the editors notice a contradiction here? Did they care?
2. And the next contradiction comes in the next sentence. If the bishops didn’t have freedom to set their own policies, how is it that they set their own policies?
3. Finally, if the individual bishops, acting “their own way,” failed to notify police in their own countries, why is the Vatican to blame?

One more sample paragraph:

This has led to a power struggle between liberal and conservative forces in the Vatican. The conservatives in the church state see the zero-tolerance policy of US bishops as a means of curtailing the rights of accused priests. By contrast, liberal spirits are pushing to rapidly investigate and refer cases to secular authorities.

1. What is a “church state,” I wonder?
2. This has never been a liberal-conservative issue. Some prelates who are ordinarily classified as “conservative”—starting with the Pope—have pressed hard for aggressive investigation of abuse claims. Some known as leading “liberals”—one thinks of Archbishop Weakland and Cardinal Mahony in the US, and now Cardinal Danneels in Belgium—have done their utmost to keep

information from public authorities.

3. There is no “contrast” between the two stands sketched by *Der Spiegel*. It’s perfectly consistent to say that accused priests should have due process within the Church, while the charges against them should also be referred to public prosecutors. In fact that’s a good policy.

Der Spiegel finishes off this hatchet job with a reference to the case of Bishop Walter Mixa, whose resignation Pope Benedict accepted and reaffirmed. The article implies that the Pope defended Mixa when the German bishop was accused of sexual abuse. That’s another blatant inaccuracy. When Bishop Mixa threatened to retract his resignation, the Vatican pointedly announced that the Pope had accepted that resignation and the issue was not subject to renegotiation. The final sentence is a snide assertion that after an unspecified length of time devoted to prayerful reflection, “Bishop Mixa, like other retired bishops, would again be available for pastoral duties.” A crucial fact is missing from that sentence: Bishop Mixa will be allowed to perform pastoral work only with the permission of his successor. In all likelihood that permission will not be forthcoming, and the unfortunate prelate’s “period of healing and reconciliation” will last until his death. But that fact does not match *Der Spiegel*’s preconceptions, so it is not presented to the readers.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=673>

Another vicious, inaccurate, and contradictory New York Times attack on Pope Benedict

July 02, 2010

Today's *New York Times*, with [another front-page attack on Pope Benedict XVI](#), erases any possible doubt that America's most influential newspaper has declared an editorial jihad against this pontificate. Abandoning any sense of editorial balance, journalistic integrity, or even elementary logic, the *Times* loses a 4,000-word barrage against the Pope: an indictment that is not supported even by the content of this appalling story. Apparently the editors are relying on sheer volume of words, and repetition of ugly details, to substitute for logical argumentation.

The thrust of the argument presented by the *Times* is that prior to his election as Pontiff, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger did not take decisive action to punish priests who abused children. Despite its exhaustive length, the story does not present a single new case to support that argument. The authors claim, at several points in their presentation, that as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Cardinal Ratzinger had the authority to take action. But then, again and again, they quote knowledgeable Church officials saying precisely the opposite.

The confusion over lines of authority at the Vatican was so acute, the *Times* reports, that in the year 2000 a group of bishops met in Rome to present their concerns. That meeting led eventually to the change in policy announced by Pope John Paul II the following year, giving the CDF sole authority over disciplinary action against priests involved in sexual abuse. By general consensus the 2001 policy represented an important step forward in the Vatican's handling of the problem, and it was Cardinal Ratzinger who pressed for that policy change. How does that sequence of events justify criticism of the future Pope? It doesn't. But the facts do not deter the *Times*.

The *Times* writers show their bias with their flippant observation that when he might have been fighting sexual abuse, during the 1980s and 1990s Cardinal Ratzinger was more prominent in his pursuit of doctrinal orthodoxy. But then, while until 2001 it was not clear which Vatican office was primarily responsible for sexual abuse, it *was* clear that the CDF was responsible for doctrinal orthodoxy. Cardinal Ratzinger's primary

focus was on his primary job.

After laying out the general argument against the Vatican's inaction—and implying that Cardinal Ratzinger was responsible for that inaction, disregarding the ample evidence that other prelates stalled his efforts—the *Times* makes the simply astonishing argument that local diocesan bishops were more effective in their handling of sex-abuse problems. That argument is not merely wrong; it is comically absurd.

During the 1980s and 1990s, as some bishops were complaining about the confusion at the Vatican, bishops in the US and Ireland, Germany and Austria, Canada and Italy were systematically covering up evidence of sexual abuse, and transferring predator-priests to new parish assignments to hide them from scrutiny. The revelations of the past decade have shown a gross dereliction of duty on the part of diocesan bishops. Indeed the ugly track record has shown that a number of diocesan bishops were themselves abusing children during those years.

So how does the *Times* have the temerity to suggest that the diocesan bishops needed to educate the Vatican on the proper handling of this issue? The lead witness for the *Times* story is Bishop Geoffrey Robinson: a former auxiliary of the Sydney, Australia archdiocese, who was hustled into premature retirement in 2004 at the age of 66 because his professed desire to change the teachings of the Catholic Church put him so clearly at odds with his fellow Australian bishops and with Catholic orthodoxy. This obscure Australian bishop, the main source of support for the absurd argument advanced by the *Times*, is the author of a book on Christianity that has been described as [advancing “the most radical changes since Martin Luther started the 16th-century Reformation.”](#) His work has drawn [an extraordinary caution from the Australian episcopal conference](#), which warned that Robinson was at odds with Catholic teaching on “among other things, the nature of Tradition, the inspiration of the Holy Scripture, the infallibility of the Councils and the Pope, the authority of the Creeds, the nature of the ministerial priesthood and central elements of the Church’s moral teaching.” Bishop Robinson is so extreme in his theological views that Cardinal Roger Mahony (who is not ordinarily known as a stickler for orthodoxy) [barred him from speaking in the Los Angeles archdiocese](#) in 2008. This, again, is the authority on which the *Times* hangs its argument against the Vatican.

And even the *Times* story itself, a mess of contradictions, acknowledges:

Bishops had a variety of disciplinary tools at their disposal — including the power to remove accused priests from contact with children and to suspend them from ministry altogether — that they could use without the Vatican’s direct approval.

It is not clear, then, why the Vatican bears the bulk of the responsibility for the sex-abuse scandal. Still less clear is why the main focus of that responsibility should be Pope Benedict. On that score, too, the *Times* blatantly contradicts its own argument. Buried in the *Times* story—on the 3rd page in the print edition, in the 46th paragraph of the article—is a report on one Vatican official who stood out at that 2000 meeting in Rome, calling for more effective action on sexual abuse.

An exception to the prevailing attitude, several participants recalled, was Cardinal Ratzinger. He attended the sessions only intermittently and seldom spoke up. But in his only extended remarks, he made clear that he saw things differently from others in the Curia.

That testimony is seconded by a more reliable prelate, Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide:

“The speech he gave was an analysis of the situation, the horrible nature of the crime, and that it had to be responded to promptly,” recalled Archbishop Wilson of Australia, who was at the meeting in 2000. “I felt, this guy gets it, he’s understanding the situation we’re facing. At long last, we’ll be able to move forward.”

The *Times* story, despite its flagrant bias and distortion, actually contains the evidence to dismiss the complaint. Unfortunately, the damage had already done before the truth comes out: that even a decade ago the future Pope Benedict was the solution, not part of the problem.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=671>

CNN's appalling attack on the Pope

September 24, 2010

This weekend the CNN television network will air a special report, “What the Pope Knew.” The goal of the show, apparently, is to persuade viewers the Pope Benedict XVI bears much of the blame for the sex-abuse scandal. If that requires massaging the facts and covering up inconvenient evidence, CNN is prepared to take those steps.

The CNN special concentrates on the case of the late Father Lawrence Murphy, a Milwaukee priest who was the target of multiple abuse complaints. In March of this year the *New York Times* gave the Murphy case front-page treatment, and charged that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had stymied a bid by the Milwaukee archdiocese to laicize the accused priest. That charge was based on a series of misunderstandings: about the case, about the duty of the Milwaukee archdiocese, about the Vatican's authority, and about the priest's due-process rights under the Code of Canon Law. [As I wrote at the time](#), a proper understanding of the story would have led the *Times* to understand that Cardinal Ratzinger was not at fault:

This is a story about the abject failure of the Milwaukee archdiocese to discipline a dangerous priest, and the tardy effort by Archbishop Weakland—who would soon become the subject of a major scandal himself—to shift responsibility to Rome.

Eventually the misunderstandings in the *Times* story were cleared up, objective reporters recognized that the Murphy case was in no way a “smoking gun” demonstrating the Pope's culpability, and the story slipped into the background. But now, six months later, CNN is resurrecting the same charges that the *Times* story made—without bothering to mention that the charges have been discredited.

The CNN report not only repeats the errors of the *Times* story, but ignores the powerful rebuttals that followed. Is this a question of journalistic incompetence, or something worse? [Matthew Balan of Newsbusters inclines to the latter explanation](#), charging that the CNN show “left out key information in order to paint Benedict XVI in the worst possible light.”

"How exactly does CNN have so little journalistic integrity that it can repeat inaccuracies that were widely debunked seven months ago, and for which there is clear, incontrovertible documentary evidence?" [ask Greg Erlandson and Matthew Bunson](#), the

co-authors of *Pope Benedict XVI and the Sexual Abuse Crisis*. It's an unanswerable question.

In addition to the Murphy case, CNN has also unearthed the similar case of an Illinois priest who was convicted of sexual abuse. [CNN contacted one of the priest's victims](#), and “told him about a letter signed by the pontiff—then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—refusing to defrock the pedophile priest.”

What Cardinal Ratzinger actually said, in a letter to the bishop responsible for the case, was that the abusive priest could not be laicized without a trial. Under the terms of canon law, the accused priest had the right to defend himself against the charges. The Springfield diocese could bring charges against him, just as the Milwaukee archdiocese could have brought charges against Murphy. But the bishops supervising these cases should have handled the matters themselves, rather than shuffling the cases off to Rome for a solution.

Ironically these two cases cited by CNN—one from Milwaukee, one from Springfield—have something else in common. Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee and Bishop Daniel Ryan of Springfield both resigned after having been credibly accused of sexual abuse. In the headlong effort to indict the Pope, CNN is in effect relying on the testimony of two bishops whose own credibility has been gravely damaged by the sex-abuse crisis.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=711>

Angry voices on both sides

September 30, 2010

Last week in this space, I [warned readers about a CNN television report](#), “What the Pope Knew.” That program, which set out to blame the Pope for the sex-abuse crisis, ignored key evidence that would have interfered with the producers’ argument. I charged CNN with grotesque bias, sloppy reporting, and a lack of journalistic integrity.

My critique of the CNN program drew an unusual number of angry email responses from readers. Oddly enough, these responses came from two very different groups, with diametrically opposing views. But in their own ways, each set of responses was disturbing.

The first set of responses came from readers who somehow had the impression that by sending feedback to the Catholic Culture site, they were contacting CNN. (Obviously these were not regular Catholic Culture readers; I suspect they had seen my post on some other site, perhaps accompanied by a confusing message.) These readers—mostly loyal Catholics, I assume—were justifiably angry about the CNN presentation, and their messages bore testimony to that anger. Once I realized that the writers were confused—mistaking me for a CNN producer—I was inclined to be sympathetic to their arguments. But many of these messages were so angry, so vituperative, so insulting, that I could not maintain that sympathy.

Folks, if you want to influence people—and not just pick a fight, or satisfy your own desire to let off steam—there’s no reason to insult the person to whom who are writing. Maybe you think that someone who disagrees with you is bound for Hell, but you’re not likely to win him over by telling him that—as several readers unequivocally told me. It is sadly ironic that some Catholics think they should defend the Pope—that most humble, deferential, and polite of all debaters—by hurling invectives at the Pope’s perceived enemies.

(As a footnote, if you want to lodge an angry complaint with a journalist, it helps to have your facts straight. Don’t waste your time, and make enemies unnecessarily, by aiming your complaint at the wrong person. Anyone who wrote to me complaining about the CNN special had not done his homework. I wasn’t responsible for the attack on the Pope; the people who were responsible never received those messages. But maybe that’s just as well.)

The second group of angry email messages came from people who did understand what I had set out to do, and excoriated me for my attempt to defend the Pope from criticism. They, too, hurled insults and invectives at me. In their case, at least the angry words hit the intended target.

Yet these folks hadn't done their homework, either. If they had read my piece carefully, and perhaps even looked into my background a bit, they would have realized that I have been extremely critical of bishops who tolerated abusive priests. They might have asked themselves why, then, I defended the Pope. They might have taken a careful look at my arguments, and to understand why I made a distinction between the deplorable performance of the American bishops and the generally admirable efforts of the Pontiff. But they didn't.

What made this group of messages both revealing and appalling is that not one of these critics raised a logical argument. Not one acknowledged the distinctions that I had made. Not one defended the CNN special (which would have been difficult to do, since it had not yet aired). Not one tried to rebut the points that I had raised. Instead these critics informed me that it was hateful to defend the Catholic Church. Several messages made the charge that my blog post qualified as "hate speech."

(Go ahead: [re-read my piece](#). Do you see anything hateful in it?)

Like anyone who engages in public debates, I am accustomed to criticism. I enjoy a good argument. But these messages were not arguments; they were assaults. More to the point, they were assaults on my right to make an argument in defense of the Roman Pontiff. My critics did not want to argue with me; they wanted to silence me.

More and more often, one hears the cry that someone who advances the teachings of the Catholic Church on a controversial topic—such as abortion, the ordination of women, or homosexuality—is engaged in "hate speech." And such "hate speech," we are told, should never be tolerated.

There is a campaign, my friends, to silence the voice of the Church. It is not yet in the mainstream, but it is gaining momentum. Critics of the Church are ready to charge that Catholic teachers and apologists are guilty of "hate speech"—that they should not be allowed to make their arguments in public; or to participate in debates on a college campus; or to hold tax-exempt status; or to use the mass media. It is absolutely essential for Catholics to resist this trend, because if it succeeds—if it reaches the mainstream and gains its objective—it will silence the voice of the Church.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=713>

Single-issue journalism

November 09, 2010

The headlines tell the story:

- **Italy: Cardinals to Ponder Response by Church to Sexual Abuse Cases** ([New York Times](#))
- **Pope summons cardinals over abuse** ([AFP](#))
- **Cardinals to address sex abuse** ([UPI](#))
- **Pope summons cardinals to discuss sex scandal and other problems** ([Canadian Press](#))
- **Prelates to discuss response to sex abuse scandal** ([Business Week](#))
- **Pope to Hold Sex-Abuse Summit** ([Wall Street Journal](#))
- **Pope calls meeting of cardinals on sex abuse** ([Washington Post](#))
- **Pope calls cardinals to Rome for sex-abuse summit** ([Belfast Telegraph](#))
- **Pope summons cardinals for meet on sex abuse** ([CathNews India](#))
- **Pope summons cardinals for abuse talks** ([Daily Nation](#))

We could continue, but you get the idea. In one screaming headline after another, the world's major media outlets have announced that Pope Benedict has called the cardinals to Rome to talk about sexual abuse.

But that's not what happened.

Yes, the Pope summoned the cardinals to Rome. And Yes, the sex-abuse scandal is on the agenda. But it isn't the top item on the agenda, nor the second.

There are [five items on the agenda for discussion at the November 19 consistory](#): two major topics, three lesser ones. The sex-abuse scandal is one of the lesser ones. Yet if you read the headlines, you would think that the scandal was the only topic for discussion. (Give Canadian Press partial credit, at least, for mentioning "other problems.") When it comes time to report on the Catholic Church, the secular media are primed and ready to report about sexual abuse, and nothing else.

You say that five Anglican bishops are entering the Church of Rome? You say that 50 people were slaughtered in a Catholic church in Baghdad? Great. Those might be stories for the back pages. For the headline, what do you have new on sexual abuse?

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=727>

Part VI: Sniping at the Pope

‘Potential frailty’

July 31, 2009

When the Pope sneezes, the professional Vatican-watchers in Rome jump to attention. They ask themselves: Does the Holy Father have a cold? Is his health slipping? Should we dust off those speculative stories about the prelates most likely to be his successor?

When an 82-year-old man slips and falls, it’s not unreasonable to pay attention. Maybe it was an ordinary accident. Then again, it could be something more serious. So when Pope Benedict fell and broke his wrist during his vacation stay in Les Combes, it made sense for reporters to ask probing questions.

Fortunately the Vatican had reassuring answers. The Pope was groping for the light switch. In the dark, in an unfamiliar bedroom, he bumped into the corner of his bed and lost his balance. The account rings true. It describes the sort of accident that could happen to anyone. No reason to get excited.

Nevertheless *Newsweek* weighed in with a [piece listing some of the cardinals who might be considered leading *papabili*](#) if a new conclave took place in the near future. To his credit, writer Edward Pentin pointed out that there isn’t a conclave planned for the near future, and attempts to name the next Roman Pontiff are somewhat futile because (to quote the closing words of his article) “it’s just too early to say.”

Still the *Newsweek* column illustrates the absurdity of this speculative enterprise. Pentin lists several cardinals who might be key figures in the next conclave, mentioning that each of the leading contenders has been a close ally of Pope Benedict. But whenever the next conclave takes place, Pope Benedict won’t be a participant, so his backing may not be an important consideration. For that matter, if the current Pontiff has put one prelate in a strong position to emerge as his successor, it’s the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, whose name is inexplicably missing from Pentin’s list.

But the point here is not the *Newsweek* has done a bad job in handicapping the leading contenders. In fact Pentin knows his field well, and his article is as plausible as any other piece in the genre. The point is that it’s silly to try this sort of handicapping in the first place.

Actually, the silliness comes through clearly in the opening sentence, in which the author tries to justify the speculation that will follow:

When Pope Benedict XVI broke his wrist in the middle of the night last week,

the world was reminded rather suddenly of his age (82), his potential frailty, and the possibility that, some time in the not too distant future, the Roman Catholic Church could be looking once again to choose a new Successor of Peter.

So what is it, then that the Pope's accident drew to our attention? His age, yes; the Holy Father is no longer a young man. But his "potential frailty?" We're all *potentially* frail, my friends. It's called mortality.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=445>

The mounting campaign to silence the Pope

March 19, 2009

The lords of the mass media are spouting their outrage at the Pope—again.

This time the Pontiff's alleged offense is his failure to believe that condoms provide the world's best hope against the AIDS epidemic. Pope Benedict dared to voice a few simple truths—that chastity is foolproof, and that people can control their own sexual behavior—and the guardians of secular wisdom are rending their garments and howling their outrage.

The Pope is simply wrong about the facts, dozens of headlines proclaim. The stories don't support those headlines, because of course the Pope is *right* about the facts. But the popular media no longer engage the argument. The object here is to shout down an opponent of conventional liberal ideology.

Respectable journalists do not intentionally publish inaccurate reports. So once editors proclaim that the Pope is wrong about the facts, it is only a short step to the decision that the Pope's arguments should not be given any publicity. Thus the voice of the Church would be stilled.

Already the public pressure is mounting against the Pope— and by extension, against anyone else who proclaims the truth as the Church has always known it. A former prime minister of France announces that the Successor to Peter has “become a problem.” AIDS activists label the Pontiff as an enemy of their cause, an enemy of the people. That sort of rhetoric suggests more than disagreement; it suggests a campaign to punish someone for his public statements.

The chorus of outrage against the Pope has been swelling in recent weeks, and it's difficult to avoid the sense that this is becoming an orchestrated campaign. Arrogant editorial writers are writing about the Pope's “mistakes” in reaching out to traditionalists, naming a conservative Austrian priest to become a bishop, and now discouraging reliance on condoms to fight AIDS. A large and growing group of journalists seems determined to spread the word that the Pope is making grievous blunders, and to suppress any evidence to the contrary.

To make matters worse, some of the Pope's angriest critics claim to be Catholics, and

draw their support from Catholic colleges and universities and/or Catholic religious orders. Waving the banners of their Church affiliations, they are working to still the voice of traditional Catholicism.

If ever there was a time to speak out in defense of the Church, and to support those who give voice to Catholic teaching, this is that time. If there was ever a time to pray for the Holy Father, this is it.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=309>

Should the Pope clarify his remarks? He already did.

November 29, 2010

Amid the furor about the Pope's statement on condom use, perhaps you're asking why the Holy Father didn't say something clear and unequivocal. Why didn't he condemn the drive to accept recreational sex, and rely on condoms for safety? Why didn't he say something like this:

This means that the sheer fixation on the condom implies a banalization of sexuality, which, after all, is precisely the dangerous source of the attitude of no longer seeing sexuality as the expression of love, but only a sort of drug that people administer to themselves.

The above paragraph, of course, is exactly what Pope Benedict did say—in the paragraph directly preceding the one that's caused all the fuss. Find it on page 119 of *Light of the World*.

Evidently, then, the Pope's words have been misinterpreted. So why doesn't he issue a clarification. He could say, for example, that the Church “does not regard [condom use] as a real or moral solution.” Why didn't he?

Actually he did—in the paragraph directly following the one that's caused all the fuss. Again it's page 119.

Thus, both immediately before and immediately after the controversial paragraph, Pope Benedict gave clear indications as to how his words should be interpreted. If you're looking for another clarification from the apostolic palace, look in the book itself; it's already there.

An ancillary question—and this one is not just rhetorical: Why did *L'Osservatore Romano* reprint the paragraph in which the Pope explores the argument for condom use, and not the follow-up paragraph in which he says that the Church “does not regard it as a real or moral solution”?

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=735>

The Pope's uncivil critics

May 15, 2009

Enough!

During this past week, as Pope Benedict XVI has carried out his “pilgrimage of peace” to the Holy Land, we have witnessed an unseemly torrent of criticism directed against the Holy Father, primarily because of what he did *not* say during his visit to Yad Vashem.

Like any public figure, the Pope must be prepared to face criticism. (In fact, he has responded with remarkable poise and equanimity, considering the barrage of hostility that he has faced.) But responsible criticism should be tempered by civility. This week, the Pope's critics have shown no such constraint.

The criticism began in earnest on Monday, after the Pope's arrival in Jerusalem and his visit to the Holocaust memorial. But really it had already begun before he left Rome. Indeed the criticism of the Pontiff has come in an unrelenting stream for months, with pundits constantly citing the “gaffes” the Pope has made in public remarks—although it is far from self-evident that his remarks have been “gaffes” at all. In the final days leading up to his latest voyage, the question being asked in countless different ways was whether the Pope would avoid such “gaffes” in Israel, and whether his performance in the Holy Land would be impressive enough to atone for his previous offenses.

So the critical tone had already been established; the editorial writers were poised to pounce on any rhetorical misstep. In all likelihood he would have been scolded no matter what he said; there were no magic words that could have placated his avowed enemies.

In any event, when the Pope visited Yad Vashem, and delivered a moving testimony to the eternal memory of the Holocaust victims, Israeli politicians and journalists pronounced his speech unacceptable. It was too dry and academic, they said. He should have expressed more remorse: on behalf of himself, his German homeland, and his Catholic Church. The speech, they said, was altogether unsatisfactory.

Writing for *the National Catholic Reporter*, the perceptive John Allen observed that it was very easy to predict what Jewish listeners wanted to hear in the Pope's address. They wanted an acknowledgement and condemnation of Christian anti-Semitism, a personal reference to the Pope's own childhood in Nazi Germany, and an explanation of

the Pope's move toward reconciliation with the notorious Holocaust-denier, Bishop Richard Williamson. The Pope's address never touched on any of those topics, Allen notes. True enough.

Now if it is easy to predict what a Jewish audience wanted to hear, it is reasonable to assume that Pope Benedict—a man of well above average intellectual powers, with plenty of intelligent counselors to advise him—could have made the same prediction. The Pope knew what the audience wanted to hear. He decided to say something else.

At this point, an intelligent listener should ask *why* the Pope chose not to deliver the speech his audience wanted. Perhaps the Pontiff realized that no matter how hard he tried, he would not satisfy his critics. Or perhaps he felt that he had a more important message to deliver. So it behooves us to pay careful attention to what he *did* say, to see whether he indicates something more about his intentions.

In that address at Yad Vashem, the Pope spoke at length about the names of the Holocaust victims. Each one was a unique individual, he stressed; each one had a family, a history, a background, personal affections and aspirations. Each individual was loved by God. The Holocaust was not only an immense political tragedy; it was also a series of millions of individual tragedies. Each life was sacred; each memory is eternal.

With this speech the Pope was offering a new perspective on the Holocaust: something unexpected, something unique. He was grappling with the immensity of the horror by examining it in the individual details. He was thinking about each of the Holocaust victims—almost one by one, as it were—rather than treating them as an abstract class. He was paying tribute to their memory, rather than using them as pawns in a contemporary political game. He might have satisfied his critics with a different sort of speech, but he might not have satisfied the debt he owed to their memory.

So the Pope's tribute was not what his listeners expected, and perhaps not even what they would have preferred, but it was *his* tribute: an intensely personal testimony. He chose not to read from the informal script prepared by the pundits. He chose to say the unexpected.

Reading that speech, an analyst might conceivably say that the Pope's message was unclear, that his delivery was uninspired, that his effort fell flat. Those would be legitimate criticisms. But to suggest that the Pope's speech conveyed a lack of goodwill toward the Jewish people is to show a deep hostility toward the Pontiff: a bias that twists the facts, to give them the worst possible interpretation.

Did the Pope fail to condemn the Holocaust? He certainly spoke about the inhumanity of the Nazi ideology. But if he did not condemn the Holocaust in so many words at Yad Vashem, he has been abundantly clear in condemning it in his past

speeches—most notably at Auschwitz. Did he fail to apologize for Christian anti-Semitism? Again, he has delivered that message frequently in the past. Was he obligated to repeat those condemnations during his visit to Jerusalem? Friendly interlocutors—indeed, even merely civil interlocutors—do not expect someone constantly to reiterate what he has already said.

As they prepared their background stories, leading up to the Pope's trip, journalists speculated about what the Pontiff might say at Yad Vashem. Their speculation generally proved inaccurate. But that speculation was based on their knowledge of the Pope's record: of what he has said and written in the past. That record is clear; how many times does the record need to be played?

Similarly, how many times does the Pope need to explain his personal record as an involuntary participant in the Hitler Youth movement? (The Vatican's chief spokesman unfortunately clouded the issue by making the argument that the Pope was never a member of Hitler Youth—thereby contradicting the testimony of the Pope himself.) Anyone who approaches the evidence with objectivity and goodwill recognizes that the young Joseph Ratzinger was enrolled against his own will, and never took an active role in the Nazi movement, even as a child. There is nothing more to explain; it's time to move on.

Pope Benedict traveled to the Holy Land hoping to advance the cause of inter-religious dialogue. Honest dialogue requires that the participants approach one another in good faith, prepared to give each other the benefit of the doubt, trying to see each other's arguments in the best possible light. What we have seen too often during this past week is something quite different: a deliberate effort to find fault, an untoward penchant for taking offense, an abject failure to *listen*. In short, incivility.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=319>

A not-so-rare mistake

May 30, 2011

The news agency provides the stories, but the individual newspapers are free to substitute their own headlines: that's the way the system works. But sometimes the newspaper editors are happy with the headline that comes over the wire with the story.

An AP story running this weekend began this way:

Pope Benedict XVI, who was forced to join the Hitler Youth as a child, has made a rare mention of life in Germany under the Nazis, calling it a “dark time.”

Here are the headlines for that story, as it ran in a handful of American media outlets:

- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*Sacramento Bee*\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*Forbes*\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*San Antonio Express*\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(CBS\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*\)](#)
- [Pope makes rare mention of life under Nazis \(*USA Today*\)](#)

I could go on, but you probably get the idea. It's not too hard to discern that AP ran the story with that headline, and American editors didn't think they could improve on it. Except perhaps the editors at the *Washington Post*, who tacked on a few words:

- [Pope Benedict XVI makes rare mention of life in Nazi Germany, calling it ‘dark time’](#)

Now you might well ask: What's the problem? Everyone received the same story. Isn't that desirable—as long as the story is accurate?

Ah, there's the rub. The content of the AP story was generally accurate. But one word in the headline conveyed an inaccurate impression.

It isn't at all "rare" for Pope Benedict to speak about his experience as a young man coming to maturity under Nazi rule. He has spoken about it in interviews; he has written about it in books. The subject has come up during his talks with priests and seminarians and young people, his talks on the Holocaust and the priesthood and the European culture and the basis for human rights. A quick check of the CWN archives showed nearly 100 news stories in which Pope Benedict spoke about the Nazi regime. Not all of those stories touched on his personal experiences, of course, but many did.

It's a minor inaccuracy; no great harm has been done. But anyone who followed Vatican affairs at all closely would realize that it the headline was misleading. Yet again we have an illustration of why, if you're interested in the news from the Vatican, you really can't afford to rely on the secular news media. You need CWN, to correct the errors and put the whole picture back into the proper focus.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=810>

Part VII: With Friends Like These

Speaking from ignorance at L'Osservatore Romano

May 22, 2009

Gian Maria Vian, the outspoken new editor of *L'Osservatore Romano*, justifies his assertion that President Obama is not pro-abortion by asserting that “the President said that the approval of the new law on abortion is not a priority of his administration.”

The new law on abortion? What new law? From the pro-abortion perspective, there's no urgent need for a new law, since the status quo allows for unrestricted legal abortion on demand.

Apparently Vian is speaking about the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA). It's true that President Obama has not made FOCA a priority. But FOCA is not the top priority for the abortion lobby today, and anyway the President heads the executive, not the legislative, branch. Obama has used his executive authority to the hilt, quickly trashing the Mexico City policy and questioning the “conscience clause.” Soon he will nominate a new member of the Supreme Court, and few observers doubt that his favored candidate will be 100% pro-abortion.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=415>

The Welcome mat for Obama

July 14, 2009

After President Obama's quick visit to the Vatican, the standard analysis, conveyed in different ways by dozens of commentators, was that the Holy See seemed friendlier to the president than the American bishops. John Allen, America's leading Vaticanologist, [put it this way](#):

First, Benedict XVI yields pride of place to no one in the depth of his pro-life commitment, and there was no mistaking the forceful message the pontiff delivered to Obama on that score;? Second, the Vatican still seems inclined to a more benign reading of Obama's positions than his fiercest American critics.

There's no question that the Pope's message to Obama, while unquestionably demanding respect for human life, was delivered in gentler, more oblique terms than the criticism from some American Catholic bishops—to say nothing of American Catholic bloggers. The differences are real. Still, they should not be exaggerated.

It's no secret that Obama has some allies within the walls of the Vatican. But then he has admirers within the US episcopal conference as well. That's not where the key difference lies.

Vatican officials, nourished on the traditions of European politics, often react to American political developments in ways that Americans find hard to understand. That's a reality as well.

But there's another important factor in this case that isn't at all hard to understand. When President Obama visited the Vatican, to speak with the Pope, he was arriving as a head of state, and speaking with another world leader: a sovereign actor on the international scene. For such meetings, certain diplomatic conventions apply. It's to be *expected* that one world leader will be courteous to another; that disagreements will be couched in careful, nuanced terms; that direct criticism will be avoided. As a world power, the Vatican hopes to work together with the White House whenever their interests converge, so it's important to establish a working relationship as friendly as possible. Those diplomatic conventions don't apply to the domestic politics of a democratic society. It's to be *expected* that a domestic critic will challenge the president directly, using the most forceful language at his command. That's the way debate is conducted on the American political scene. So it's a mistake to assume that, just because

the Pope was courteous and his language was guarded, he is more sympathetic toward Obama's policies than the American bishops.

When *L'Osservatore Romano* carries favorable commentary on the Obama presidency, that's significant. When influential cardinals at the Vatican say they're persuaded that Obama is not pro-abortion, that's significant too. But when the diplomatic language of the Pontiff doesn't match the political statements of the US hierarchy, that's not necessarily significant at all. The difference in the approach may camouflage a similarity in the message. It's important to read the messages carefully, and to notice the points that are emphasized.

In the case of [Obama's visit with the Pope](#), the Pontiff's emphasis was unmistakable. He sent the president away with a copy of *Dignitas Personae*, indicating for all the world to see that he thinks Obama has something to learn about the dignity of human life.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otn.cfm?id=435>

The Vatican newspaper has betrayed the Pope

November 22, 2010

Pope Benedict has not changed the Church's teachings, or even intimated that they might be subject to change. The Holy Father has not called for a new debate on the morality of contraception. He has not suggested that condom use might sometimes be morally justifiable.

Yet today millions of people around the world believe that the Pontiff has changed Church teaching, has opened the question of contraception for debate, and has justified condom use in some circumstances. How did that happen?

Yet again, Pope Benedict has been badly served by his public-relations staff. In this case, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano* bears most of the blame for a truly disastrous gaffe.

An exciting book project subverted

The stories that are dominating media coverage of the Vatican this week can be traced to an interview in which Pope Benedict XVI responded to questions from the German journalist Peter Seewald. That interview was the basis for an exciting new book, *Light of the World*, which is due for publication this week.

The book is the 3rd such collaborative effort between the Pope and Seewald. But it is the first since Benedict XVI assumed the Chair of Peter, and the notion that a reigning Pontiff would submit to a book-length interview is a sensation in itself. Readers who expect something very special from such a book will not be disappointed. *Light of the World* is indeed sensational.

As an interviewer Seewald does his job well. He respectfully but persistently pressed the Pope to explain his thinking on a host of issues, many of them controversial. Pope Benedict, for his part, is candid and lucid, presenting his thoughts with that simple clarity that makes him such a great natural teacher. In *Light of the World* the reader will find the Pontiff's honest thoughts on topics such as:

- the nature of papal infallibility and Petrine authority;

- the real reason for lifting excommunications on the traditionalist bishops of the Society of St. Pius X;
- the limits of dialogue with Islam;
- the possibility of a papal resignation;
- the message of Fatima;
- the day-to-day life of the apostolic palace;
- the true causes of the sex-abuse scandal and the prospects for reform.

On every one of these topics, this reader found the Pope's remarks refreshingly honest and thought-provoking. The Holy Father offers a number of fascinating revelations, along with an enormous amount of profound theological reflection. The book is, again, sensational.

Those of us who received advance copies of *Light of the World* were told that the text was under a very strict embargo. We were forbidden to quote from it, cite it, or even make any specific revelations about its content until the formal launch of the book this week. Such embargos are not unusual in the world of publishing (although the publishers were unusually stern about it in this case), and professional journalists routinely honor them.

Then, incredibly, the Vatican's own newspaper violated the embargo. Betraying the publishers and breaking trust with all the other journalists who were fulfilling their promises, *L'Osservatore Romano* reproduced a passage from the Pope's interview. And not just any passage. The Vatican newspaper reproduced—without explanation or comment—a passage in which Pope Benedict reflected on the possibility that in some extreme cases, the impulse to use a condom might show a flickering of unselfishness in a seriously corrupted conscience.

Moreover, *L'Osservatore* broke the embargo, and published the excerpt, during a weekend when the Vatican was happily distracted by a consistory. At a time when Church leaders should have been celebrating a joyous occasion—the elevation of 24 members to the College of Cardinals—top Vatican officials were scrambling to explain the Pope's words, which had been published prematurely and outside of their proper context.

The launch of *Light of the World* should have been another joyful occasion. With appropriate planning, the publisher was poised to introduce the Pope's book with a major publicity campaign. Now that publicity—which might have offered an accurate and

favorable portrayal of the Pope's book—will be nearly lost in the deluge of misinformation currently sweeping across the world.

What the Pope said—and did not say

Of all the passages that might have been culled out of the book, *L'Osservatore Romano* chose some speculative remarks by the Pontiff on the subject of condom use. Any capable journalist should have realized in advance that these remarks would be misinterpreted—especially when they were presented out of context.

In the passage that *L'Osservatore* published, Pope Benedict was not backing away from earlier statements, in which he had said that the distribution of condoms is not the proper way to fight the spread of AIDS. On the contrary, the Pope was defending that stand! Far from retracting his previous words, the Holy Father was explaining and elaborating on them.

In that context, when Seewald pressed him on the question of whether condom use might ever be advisable, the Pope replied:

There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality.

When Seewald asked for a clarification, the Pope quickly added that the Church can never regard condom use as “a real or moral solution.”

Notice that in his hypothetical example, the Pope spoke of a “male prostitute,” presumably involved in homosexual acts. So the question of contraception—the main reason for the Church's opposition to condoms—was removed from the equation. This prostitute is engaged in profoundly immoral acts. The Pope does not suggest that the use of a condom would make his prostitution less immoral; he says only that by recognizing the imperative to protect his sexual partner, the theoretical prostitute is making a small step toward proper moral reasoning.

Here the Pope was making a theoretical point, not a practical one. He was not teaching, but explaining a point. He was not speaking with authority—in fact, earlier in the book he had explained why nothing the Pope says in an interview should be regarded as authoritative—but speculating. Nothing in what the Pope said, or the way he said it,

reflects any change in the Church's teaching.

In [her helpful explanation of the Pope's words](#), Janet Smith observed that "the Holy Father is not making a point about whether the use of a condom is contraceptive or even whether it reduces the evil of a homosexual sexual act; again, he is speaking about the psychological state of some who might use condoms." To place the Pope's speculative remarks about the male prostitute in the proper context, Smith offered an analogy of her own:

If someone was going to rob a bank and was determined to use a gun, it would be better for that person to use a gun that had no bullets in it. It would reduce the likelihood of fatal injuries. But it is not the task of the Church to instruct potential bank robbers how to rob banks more safely and certainly not the task of the Church to support programs of providing potential bank robbers with guns that could not use bullets.

Journalistic incompetence

If it is "not the task of the Church" to give safety tips to bank robbers and homosexual prostitutes, why did the Pope offer that example? In the context of a lengthy conversation, with a sympathetic interviewer, it is easy to see how the Pope might have been tempted toward speculative remarks. But in the weeks between the time of the interview and the date of publication, did no one at the Vatican recognize the likelihood that the Pope's words would be yanked out of context? Did any authoritative Vatican official vet the text of the interview, to ensure that the Pope's answers to Seewald were not subject to confusion and/or misinterpretation? If not, then this pontificate is now suffering from another self-inflicted wound. Surely any capable journalist would have recognized the potential for trouble, immediately upon reading the Pope's words. Anyone alert to the rhythms of everyday public debate would have been able to warn the Pontiff that his subtle distinctions about the morality of condom use would be lost upon the secular media. Jeff Miller makes a [witty reference to the "Ginger factor"](#): the tendency of journalists, when they encounter a mention of "condoms," to block out all other words. Secular journalists, reading the Pope's words in the fateful paragraph above, would ask themselves only whether the Pontiff was allowing for the possibility of condom use, and conclude that he was. So inevitably the Pope's statement would be seen as opening a loophole in Church teaching.

Yet it was the Vatican's own journalists, at *L'Osservatore Romano*, who put the

Pope's words in print without any proper introduction, any effort to put the Pontiff's thoughts in context. The Pope's statement was bound to stir up trouble; its premature publication in the Vatican newspaper exacerbated the problem.

In past months *L'Osservatore Romano* has often embarrassed the Vatican, with puerile articles gushing about the merits of Michael Jackson, the Beatles, and *The Simpsons*. But this editorial blunder is far more serious. With its gross mishandling of this very serious issue, the Vatican newspaper has given rise to a worldwide confusion on a very important moral issue—damage that it may take years of painstaking work to undo.

“Ironically, the message of this good and brilliant Pope has been hobbled nearly as much by the baffling failures of some of his own aides as by unfriendly coverage from the world's media,” writes Archbishop Charles Chaput for *First Things*. For the welfare of the Church, these public-relations debacles must end.

Why did *L'Osservatore Romano* violate journalistic norms, ignore obvious dangers, and print a potentially explosive statement out of its proper context? Was the editor hoping to stir up a ruckus, and push sales of *Light of the World* regardless of the pastoral cost? Was he hoping to stir up a new debate on condom use—something the Pope was quite obviously *not* seeking? Or was the editor blind to the dangers of publishing this excerpt? Whatever the answer might be, he has demonstrated that his editorial judgment cannot be trusted. As a necessary first step to address the continuous public-relations bungling at the Vatican, Giovanni Maria Vian, the editor of *L'Osservatore Romano* should be asked to resign.

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