

The Truth of the Matter

Mediating the mistakes of a misguided media



by matt wade
mrw031000@utdallas.edu

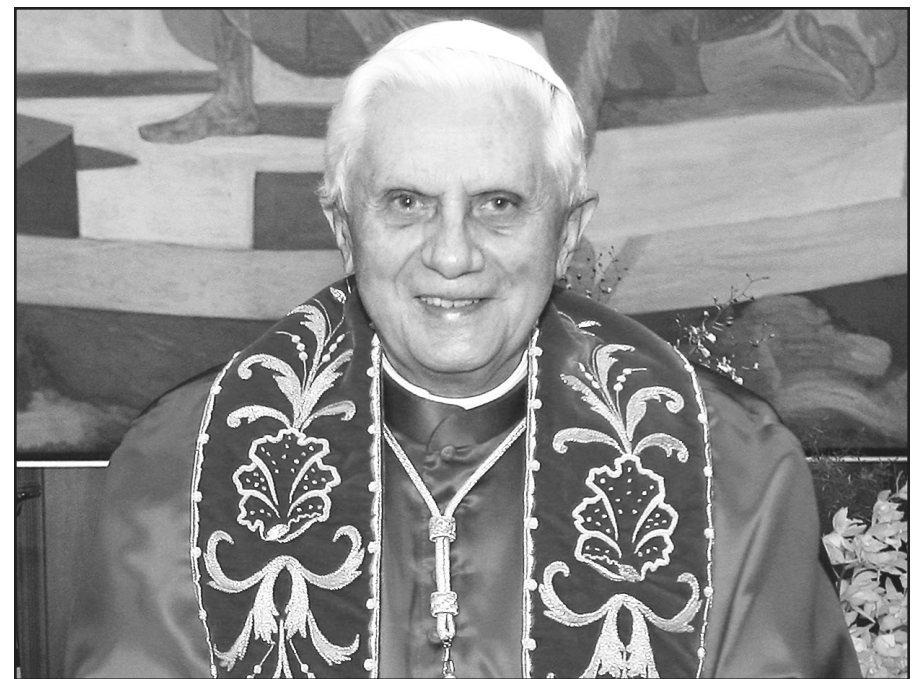
The recent actions and words of Pope Benedict XVI ignited a firestorm of controversy among individuals and world media. The teachings of the Catholic Church have always been subject to criticism, but clarification is imperative when that criticism is a result of misinformation and misrepresentation by the media. Such criticism distorts the truth by ignoring the context of the Pope's statements and misstating Church tradition. When the Pope's statements are taken in context and Church tradition is stated accurately, their intent is apparent: to guide the world to truth.

A recent *New York Times* article about indulgences gives evidence of mainstream misunderstanding of Church teaching. It has been said that the "Church's re-introduction of indulgences" is evidence of Pope Benedict XVI's archaic attitude; however, a quick reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church would reveal that indulgences could always have been obtained by meeting certain conditions. Contrary to popular belief, Church doctrine has never condoned financial requirements for indulgences and outlawed any such requirements in 1567. Truthful depictions of the Church's teachings are vital to discussions about its global mission and outreach, especially in areas stricken by disease, poverty, and hatred.

That mission of global outreach recently brought Pope Benedict to AIDS-plagued Africa. During an in-flight interview, the Pope stated that AIDS "cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which can even

increase the problem." The "problem" of which he spoke was not a singular infection through the use of a condom in one encounter but the spread of AIDS as a whole. In that context Pope Benedict's statement is backed by leading scientists in the field of AIDS research. James Shelton of the U.S. Bureau for Global Health lists "condoms are the answer" as one of the top ten misconceptions about AIDS epidemics. He states that "condoms seem to foster disinhibition, in which people engage in risky sex either with condoms or with the intention of using condoms." The Pope echoes Shelton's point: Distributing condoms gives a false sense of security and could cause individuals to have multiple partners. Shelton goes so far as to say, "Truthfully our priority must be on the key driver of generalised epidemics — concurrent [(non-monogamous)] partnerships." The argument that sexual behavior cannot and will not change is also a myth Shelton addresses. Declines in multiple partners were accompanied by significant reductions in HIV incidence in Kenya and eastern Zimbabwe. Edward Green, an AIDS researcher at Harvard, notes that in "every African country in which HIV infections have declined, this decline has been associated with a decrease in the proportion of men and women reporting more than one sex partner over the course of a year." Decreasing such behavior is exactly what Catholic teachings and organizations promote. Although widely misconstrued, the Pope's statements about preventing the spread of AIDS are supported by objective research and clearly stated with the best interests of the population in mind.

Much like the Pope's statements about AIDS prevention, excommunication is frequently misunderstood. There are two forms of excommunication: *ferendae sententiae* and *latae sententiae*. *Ferendae sententiae* is imposed by the judgment of an ecclesiastical official such as the pope, but *latae sententiae* is incurred automatically when a person commits one of several serious offenses. According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, abortion is one of those offenses and has been condemned since the earliest days of the Church. Accomplices incur the same penalty by enabling the offense.



Pope Benedict XVI. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Because of that law, the doctors and mother in Brazil who were involved in procuring the abortion of the twins of a nine-year-old girl *automatically* excommunicated *themselves*. Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho merely announced the penalty dictated by Church law. The young girl was neither excommunicated nor was she held responsible for the actions of her mother and the doctors. The situation is unquestionably tragic, but the death of the two children only intensifies that tragedy. Young age pregnancy does not require or necessitate abortion. There is a history of young mothers — most of whom were rape victims — that did not procure abortions. The youngest mother on record was only five years old when she gave birth to her son in Peru in 1939. In 1979, a ten-year-old girl in Indianapolis gave birth to twins. Between 2006 and 2008 there were several cases

of girls, ranging in age from 8 to 11, becoming mothers. The Church supports medical procedures during a pregnancy if the purpose is to save the mother's life, but *the primary intent should never be to destroy innocent human life*. The dire situation of the nine-year-old Brazilian girl is truly difficult, but there is reason to believe that the murder of her twins was not necessary.

Once examined, the statements of Pope Benedict XVI are found to be in accord with the opinions of leading scientists and Church teachings. They are words of truth based on proven facts, not "irresponsible, dangerous, and knowingly dishonest discourse." He speaks for the Church out of a deep understanding of the principles defended by believers for centuries — especially the sanctity of all human life. Pope Benedict's and Archbishop Sobrinho's statements were carried out in a spirit of compassion and sincerity to convey a message of hope for the people of Africa, for the victims of violence and rape, and for the people of the world. ■

“ Much like the Pope's statements about AIDS prevention, excommunication is frequently misunderstood. ”

Matt gets misrepresented by the medium of funhouse mirrors all the time...

Discuss this article at [amp.utdallas.edu!](http://amp.utdallas.edu/)