

BBC'S HIT JOB ON THE POPE

On October 1, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) aired a documentary, "Sex Crimes and the Vatican," that accused Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) of covering up priestly sexual abuse for 20 years. The show, which aired on the BBC's flagship, Panorama, says that Cardinal Ratzinger had been in charge of enforcing a 1962 Vatican document that was allegedly written to cover up these crimes.

It is a tribute to American journalism that the lies told by the BBC have not been widely disseminated in the United States. The 1962 document that the BBC refers to had absolutely nothing to do with covering up priestly sexual abuse. Quite the contrary: it dealt specifically with solicitations that a priest might make in the confessional. In fact, it prescribed penalties for any priest who, "whether by words or signs or *nods of the head*" (our emphasis) might convey a sexual advance.

This was an ecclesiastical response to a possible offense that, given the priest-penitent privilege, lay outside the purview of civil authorities. Furthermore, if a priest were found guilty, he could be thrown out of the priesthood. To top it off, if the penitent were to tell someone about sexual solicitation by a priest in the confessional (perhaps another priest), he or she had 30 days to report the incident to the bishop or face excommunication. In other words, the Vatican document actually prescribed punishment for the penitent if he or she didn't turn in the guilty priest. The 1962 document was superseded by the 1983 Code of Canon Law and the norms established in 2001 for dealing with serious crimes involving the sacraments. As for the sexual abuse scandal, it was not until 2002, after the scandal had exploded in the media, that Pope John Paul II appointed Cardinal Ratzinger to investigate these matters.

In short, the BBC's hit job on the pope demands a quick and sincere apology.