

CNN'S SKEWED SERIES ON PAPACY

CNN's six-part series, "Pope: The Most Powerful Man in History," which debuted on March 11, was promoted as a comprehensive account of the history of the papacy. While the first two parts were mostly fair, there were important exceptions. More important, the series suffered from a skewed orientation, one which highlighted the incredible power of a "hierarchal" institution: the influence and reach of the Catholic Church was central to the documentary.

The documentary featured distinguished persons such as Cardinal Donald Wuerl, but it also profiled strident enemies of the Catholic Church. For example, Anthea Butler, a professor who has called God a "white racist," was given much exposure. Surely if CNN were doing a series on gays it would not invite gay bashers to opine, even if the commentary aired in the show proved to be inoffensive.

CNN chose Liam Neeson to be the show's narrator. He says he was "raised" Catholic, and we all know what that means. Today he is more well known for his lobbying efforts against the Catholic Church: He wants abortion legalized in Ireland. He is also obsessed with the Church's power and hierarchy.

It appears that CNN's obsession with power and hierarchy more accurately reflects what it has become, more than what the Catholic Church is.

In 2015, *Business Insider* concluded that the Vatican was worth about \$3 billion. In 2014, Morgan Stanley estimated CNN's worth around \$10 billion. And while the Catholic Church is a global institution, so is CNN. It has two dozen branded networks and services accessible to more than 2 billion people in more than 200 countries and territories. That's a lot of power and hierarchy.

The first installment of the series was a mostly even-handed

account of the evolution of the papacy. But its coverage of the Crusades was flawed.

To be sure, the show featured some cogent observations from St. Louis University professor Thomas Madden. He pointed out that "the Crusades were, first and foremost, an act of piety," undertaken to stop Islamic invaders who were violently attacking nuns, clergy, and pilgrims; the Christians also sought to liberate the holy city of Jerusalem from its Muslim conquerors.

But Madden's observations were drowned out by the overriding theme of this segment: that the Crusades were little more than a power grab by Pope Urban II.

Such assertions are nothing new. Princeton's Bernard Lewis, one of the world's most noted historians, has written, "At the present time, the Crusades are often depicted as an early experiment in expansionist imperialism." Yet, "To the people of the time, both Muslim and Christian, they were no such thing."

Rather, Lewis explains, "The Crusade was a delayed response to the jihad, the holy war for Islam, and its purpose was to recover by war what had been lost by war—to free the holy places of Christendom and open them once again, without impediment, to Christian pilgrimage."

Just as important, as Madden has pointed out many times before, "All the Crusades met all the criteria of a just war." But one would never know this by watching this episode on CNN. There is no question that the uninformed viewer was presented with a jaundiced view of the Crusades.

The second part of the series focused on Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Some of the commentary was sophomoric, substituting conjecture for more rigorous analysis.

For example, we were told that Pope Benedict XVI resigned

because he realized that the problems of the Vatican “were simply too great for him”; and that his resignation was “a devastating comment on the last five or six years of his predecessor,” St. John Paul II, who remained pope as his health failed.

Most outrageous was Butler’s assertion that having two living popes means having “to decide who you listen to.” Benedict, by voluntarily resigning and then retiring quietly, left no confusion as to his successor’s full authority as pope.

Let’s hope the rest of the series is more balanced than the first two episodes.