

THE MEDIA, THE POPE, AND DISINFORMATION

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On March 22, 2014, Pope Francis received a group of Italian broadcasters at the Vatican. In an unscripted address, he defined the virtues, mission, and sins of the communication media. While encouraging the broadcasters to carry out their work along the paths of truth, goodness, and beauty, he also warned them about three sins embodied in the media, which he called “the road of lies.” Those three sins are: “disinformation, slander, and defamation.” According to the pope, slander and defamation are serious, but not as dangerous as disinformation.

Pope Francis calls disinformation “the most dangerous sin embodied by the media” because it is a partial truth told for political expediency. With the other two, he explained, truth can eventually be discerned and the error corrected. With disinformation, however, “those who watch the television or listen to the radio are not able to arrive at a perfect judgment, because they do not have all the elements necessary to do so, and the media do not give them.” Stated differently, disproving a false charge is hard, but eventually reasonable people can see through the charges. Disinformation – a misleading partial truth that comes from a seemingly reliable outlet – is much harder to overcome.

The Catholic Church frequently has been the victim of disinformation. Regular readers of *Catalyst* are well aware of campaigns designed to portray all priests and bishops as pedophiles while ignoring issues related to predatory homosexuality. Recently, the motion picture “Philomena” was peddled as a true history when, in fact, it was incredibly misleading and deliberately cruel to Irish nuns. In the recent

television series, "Cosmos," host Neil deGrasse Tyson's portrayal of the Catholic Church as being opposed to science was far off base. This, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg.

Pope Francis himself has been the target of disinformation campaigns about his role in Argentina's "dirty war." In 1976, the military kidnapped and tortured two priests. The argument is that Francis (then Fr. Bergoglio) contributed to their suffering, either by refusing to defend them prior to the kidnapping or by failing to help afterwards. Actually, Bergoglio tried to remove them from harm's way, and his later intercession with dictator Jorge Rafael Videla may have saved their lives. Two days after Bergoglio became Pope Francis, the surviving kidnapped priest strongly denied that Francis was in any way at fault for his suffering.

Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, was often assailed in the press for having been a member of the Hitler Youth when he was a boy. It was less often mentioned that he refused to attend meetings, never joined the Nazi party, deserted the army, and eventually became a prisoner of war.

Pope John Paul II was the target of an elaborate disinformation effort early in his papacy. In 1983, Polish intelligence agents crafted a phony diary purportedly written by a former lover of Cardinal Wojtyla, the future John Paul II. They used the identity of a woman he would have known but who was by then dead. The plan was to leave the diary hidden in an apartment where it would be found during a police raid. Reporters would assume that it was legitimate and write about it as such. As it turned out, however, the agent assigned to plant the fake diary got drunk and was involved in an automobile accident. In an effort to avoid arrest, he explained who he was and exposed the plan. One can only wonder what would have happened had the pope's credibility been damaged early in his pontificate by that disinformation scheme.

No individual Catholic figure has been a greater target of those peddling disinformation than Pope Pius XII, who led the Church from 1939 to 1958. Some things about him were simply made-up, like charges that he met with Hitler, blessed German troops, or tried to kidnap Jewish children. In the 1960s, the play "The Deputy" was shaped, promoted, and produced by Soviet disinformation experts seeking to damage the Church. More recently, the book "Hitler's Pope" used a doctored photograph on the cover, a butchered quotation from Thomas Merton in the front matter, and was largely based on a six page letter that was reduced with ellipses to a few lines that – thanks to misleading translations – makes the future pope seem anti-Semitic. Disinformation like that is hard to counter, and it takes on a life of its own.

Consider how Pius XII's reputation was impacted by overt disinformation created to discredit someone else. During WWII, Croatian Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac was a staunch opponent of the Nazi puppet regime that took charge of his nation (the Ustaša). After the war, Croatia, then part of Yugoslavia, fell under Soviet domination. When Stepinac became a problem for the new government, authorities charged him with collaboration with the Ustaša. In anticipation of his 1946 trial, the Communist Party published a book that purported to contain documentary proof. The documents, of course, were forged or edited in order to do as much damage as possible. The result of the trial was foreordained. Stepinac was convicted and eventually poisoned to death while under house arrest.

In the 1960s, Italian writer Carlo Falconi sought permission from the Yugoslav authorities to do research in Croatian archives for a book that he was writing on Pope Pius XII. Party officials were in a quandary. If they gave Falconi access to the archives, he would see how the evidence had been manufactured and how documents had been altered. They eventually handed over *some* documents and provided a copy of the book that they had produced prior to trial. On the basis

of these documents, Falconi wrote his book, *The Silence of Pius XII*, which shaped much scholarship on Pope Pius XII.

In 1985, Stepinac's prosecutor, Jakov Blažević, acknowledged that Stepinac had been framed and that he was tried only because he refused to sever the ties between Croats and the Vatican. About that same time, one of the former governmental officials who had put together the case against Stepinac explained: "The indictments were designed rather more for publicity than for legality." In 1992, when Croatia came out from under the thumb of Communism, one of the first acts of Parliament was to issue a declaration condemning "the political trial and sentence passed on Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac in 1946."

Unfortunately, the damage had been done; the disinformation was out there, and it remains much cited to this day. In his book so critical of Pope Pius XII (and Pope John Paul II) *Hitler's Pope*, John Cornwell, who could easily have uncovered the truth, cited Falconi by name nine times and praised his "painstaking" research. That is the power of disinformation.

Until recently, Pope Pius XI was the "good pope" against whom Pope Pius XII was compared, but he has now become the target of disinformation that tries to link him with Mussolini. The kernel of truth, of course, is that the Catholic Church had to survive in Rome under Mussolini, but the claim that Pius XI was friendly with Mussolini is absurd. In 1931, while Mussolini was still being favorably profiled in American publications, his "black shirts" regularly beat up Catholics, prompting Pius XI to issue the encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, in which he speculated about Italy's "ultimate goal of domination" of the Church.

His modern critics argue that Pius XI supported Mussolini's aggression during Italy's war with Ethiopia. Their argument is that the pope hoped it would expand the Church's influence. In reality, however, prior to the invasion of Ethiopia, he spoke

out on at least three occasions, condemning Italy's aggression and calling it a crime against the moral law. Later, when Mussolini ordered Rome illuminated to celebrate Italian victories, Pius kept Vatican City dark.

Mussolini issued his "Aryan Manifesto" in July 1938, calling on Italians to proclaim themselves racists and acknowledge that Jews do not belong to the Italian race. The very next day, Pius XI branded the Manifesto "a true form of apostasy," and he said that "the entire spirit of the doctrine is contrary to the Faith of Christ." At least twice more in the following weeks Pius reiterated this position, and his question about "why Italy should have felt a disgraceful need to imitate Germany," was reprinted on the front page of the Vatican newspaper. He also ordered Catholic universities to refute these false teachings, and he appointed several Jewish scholars to positions of importance in the Vatican, saying: "All human beings are admitted equally, without distinction of race, to participate, to share, to study and to explore truth and science."

On September 6, 1938, in a statement which—though barred from the Fascist press—quickly made its way around the world, Pope Pius XI said:

"Mark well that in the Catholic Mass, Abraham is our Patriarch and forefather. Anti-Semitism is incompatible with the lofty thought which that fact expresses. It is a movement with which we Christians can have nothing to do. No, no, I say to you it is impossible for a Christian to take part in anti-Semitism. It is inadmissible. Through Christ and in Christ we are the spiritual progeny of Abraham. Spiritually, we are all Semites."

The *New York Times* carried a front page story on the statement, and in January 1939, *The National Jewish Monthly* reported that "the only bright spot in Italy has been the Vatican, where fine humanitarian statements by the Pope have

been issuing regularly." The Feb. 1939 issue of *The National Monthly*, published by *B'nai B'rith*, put Pope Pius XI on its cover, along with the headline: "Pope Pius XI attacks Fascism." Inside the journal, under the title "Pope Assails Fascism," it stated: "Regardless of their personal religious beliefs, men and women everywhere who believe in democracy and the rights of man have hailed the firm and uncompromising stand of Pope Pius XI against Fascist brutality, paganism and racial theories." The United States Congress even passed a joint resolution acknowledging Pius XI as a symbol for "the re-establishment of the rule of moral law in human society." Yet, modern purveyors of disinformation try to discredit the Church by making false accusations against him.

The Catholic Church has often been the victim of disinformation, but there are other victims as well. Today, anyone with a laptop and access to the Internet can reach a large audience. Misleading stories from unproven sources, however, usually can be exposed. The greatest danger comes from sources that we trust. We rely on newspaper and magazine editors to edit out the falsehoods. We expect book publishers to do the same. We need all media professionals to help us find the truth. That is what Francis meant when he encouraged broadcast journalists to carry out their work along the paths of truth, goodness, and beauty and to avoid the sin of disinformation.

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