

MEDIA WATCHDOG SMEARS POPE

Following the successful visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States, the media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) ran a story titled, "Pope Gets Pass on Church Abuse History." The self-styled "progressive" organization claimed that during his reign as pontiff, the pope has been given a pass on his "record of downplaying the [sex abuse scandal]." We pressed FAIR hard to provide us evidence to substantiate its claims of Benedict's alleged cover-up and they came up empty.

FAIR claimed that in 2001, before he was named pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger "sent a letter to church bishops invoking a 1962 doctrine threatening automatic excommunication for any Catholic official who discussed abuse cases outside the Church's legal system." The group cited an English newspaper, the *Observer* to back up its claims. When we told FAIR that the newspaper's interpretation of Ratzinger's letter was flat-out wrong, the organization asked us if the newspaper ran a correction. So that was the level of scrutiny FAIR employed: It did no fact checking of its own, instead it relied on foreign sources to verify its accusations.

As soon as we saw FAIR's report, we knew that they had been sucked into the lie that Cardinal Ratzinger attempted to cover up the sex abuse scandal. This wasn't the first time we found ourselves fighting these allegations. In 2003, Bill Donohue took CBS Evening News apart when they flagged the allegedly incriminating 1962 Vatican document. As we noted then, there was no other mainstream media outlet that picked up this bogus story. For good reason.

The document in question, "On the Matter of Proceeding in Cases of Solicitations," did not apply to sexual misconduct—it applied only to sexual solicitation that might take place in the confessional. By sexual solicitation it meant "whether by

words or signs or nods of the head," the priest may have crossed the line. Because the policy was specifically aimed at protecting the secrecy of the confessional, it called for an ecclesiastical response: civil authorities were not to be notified because it involved a sacrament of the Catholic Church, not a crime of the state. Guilty priests could be thrown out of the priesthood and a penitent who told someone what happened had 30 days to report the incident to the bishop or face excommunication. In other words, the document detailed punitive measures for miscreants—just the opposite of a cover-up.

On May 2, we issued a news release that pointed out FAIR's inaccuracies on the story. We noted that rather than do its own homework, FAIR resorted to a British tabloid to do its dirty work.

Less than two weeks later, FAIR challenged our statement. The watchdog group stood by its original report and that the 1962 document could be read to include acts outside the confessional. In its rebuttal, FAIR cited a priest that provided no evidence from the document that substantiated FAIR's accusation.

FAIR's actions were despicable and it is never to be trusted again on matters Catholic.