

# SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: PENN & TELLER'S LIES

There can be no excuse for the vicious rant that Penn & Teller delivered against the Vatican in their season finale. The language and the tone were scurrilous enough to merit condemnation. However, our outrage is not simply directed at their style: the substance of their accusations is just as pernicious. Since Penn Jillette, as always, did the talking for the duo, we will focus on him; Teller, to be sure, is just as guilty.

Jillette spent a lot of time attacking the Vatican for its alleged attack on an Italian comedian, Sabina Guzzanti. He accused Pope Benedict XVI of seeking to throw “her sexy ass in jail,” and repeated this charge over and over again. Here’s what happened.

In July 2008, Sabina (as she is known) deliberately set out to slam the Holy Father. It was at a rally against the alleged interference by the Vatican in Italian affairs that she let loose. She predicted that “within 20 years the pope will be where he ought to be—in Hell, tormented by great big poofter devils, and very active ones, not passive ones.”

As described by the U.K.’s *timesonline*, Sabina remarked that not only would the pope be sentenced to eternal damnation, he would be “tormented by homosexual demons.” She told her audience that within twenty years, the power-hungry Vatican would be in charge of hiring all public school teachers in Italy.

Italian authorities initially considered reprisals against Sabina, but dropped the case almost as soon as it opened it. As for the Vatican, it never threatened any punitive action—it was all a lie that Jillette made up to discredit the Catholic

Church. Moreover, one Jesuit scholar, Father Bartolomeo Sorge, said, "We Christians put up with many insults, it is part of being a Christian, as is forgiveness. I feel sure the pope has already forgiven those who insulted him on Piazza Navona." Indeed, the sharpest words delivered by the Vatican were a mild rebuke: it expressed "profound displeasure with the offensive words about the Holy Father."

The other big issue that Jillette seized upon was a 1962 Vatican document which he said was an organized cover-up of priestly sexual abuse. It was nothing of the sort.

The document that Jillette referred to never applied to sexual misconduct—it applied only to sexual solicitation in the confessional. The purpose of the document was to protect the privacy of the confessional while at the same time guarding against solicitation made by the priest. Not only was it not a cover-up, it provided for stiff penalties: a priest found guilty of sexual solicitation in the confessional could be thrown out of the priesthood. The penitent, for his or her part, was under strict guidelines to report any improper advances to the local bishop. In other words, not only did Jillette lie—he totally misrepresented what the document said.

Similarly, accusations that Pope Benedict XVI, in his role as Cardinal Ratzinger, was in charge of overseeing the matter of priestly sexual abuse are pure nonsense. As a matter of fact, he had nothing to do with this issue until after the scandal became a major story in 2002, and then he moved with dispatch to deal with the issue in a serious manner. In other words, the pope's character was unfairly maligned by Jillette.

Not to be outdone, Jillette threw out old barbs about the Crusades, never indicating that the Crusades were a defensive response by Catholics against Muslim thuggery.

The Inquisition card was also played, and again the implication was that the Catholic Church's role was nefarious:

the truth is that the Church instituted a system of justice to deal with an otherwise unjust campaign launched by civil authorities against suspected heretics. Abuses took place, but it is more the stuff of Black Legends to charge the Catholic Church with wholesale abuse.

Slavery, women and gays were other subjects touched on by Jillette. Too bad the viewers never learned that the first public person in history to protest slavery was St. Patrick. Too bad they never learned how women far outnumber men in attendance at Mass and as lay persons in service to the Church. Too bad they were never told that no private institution has a better record of servicing AIDS patients than the Catholic Church. But then again, the facts would have gotten in the way of Jillette's screed.

Even if half of what they said were true, there is still no defensible reason for CBS to allow these two hate-filled men to unleash their fury. No other group in American society is subjected to this kind of savagery. Let's face it: every group has its dirty laundry, real and contrived, yet CBS wouldn't dare give the green light to a thrashing of gays, Indians, Muslims, African Americans, Jews and others. Which gets to our bottom line: We don't want special treatment for Catholics—we just want to be treated as equals.

A few years ago, a CBS radio official called Bill Donohue in response to a complaint he made about Penn & Teller. They had a productive conversation, and the official said he would speak to the two of them. When Donohue was asked if he wanted to meet with Jillette, he declined the offer. Just tell him to knock it off, he instructed. That obviously went nowhere.

Justice demands that Penn & Teller be canned. It is up to CBS to do so. Please write to Leslie Moonves.