

TORN OUT OF CONTEXT

The *New York Times* recently ran two positive reviews of David Kertzer's book, *The Popes Against the Jews*; one review was by Richard Bernstein and the other was by Garry Wills. Kertzer maintains that a long line of popes prepared the way for the Holocaust. Both men seize on the same quote taken from Kertzer to prove how malicious the Vatican was to Jews.

In 1918, Msgr. Achille Ratti (later to become Pope Pius XI) wrote the following in a report to Pope Benedict XV regarding conditions in Poland: "One of the most evil and strongest influences that is felt here, perhaps the strongest and the most evil, is that of the Jews."

For Bernstein, this passage is an example of how Ratti—and by extension the Church—thought of the Jews. But it is not clear from this quote whether Ratti was endorsing this view or merely offering a descriptive account. Obviously, it makes a big moral difference. Bill Donohue called Bernstein and left a message explaining what it was about but Bernstein (whom Bill knows) never got back to him.

What Wills wrote is even more disturbing. He introduces the quote from the report by writing that Ratti "dismissed reports of pogroms there as inventions of Jewish propaganda."

But in Kertzer's preceding paragraph to the Ratti quote in question, he cites from the report that Ratti spoke kindly of Jews: he explicitly said that he has come "to admire the goodness and the faith of their people." Ratti does mention that "Unfortunately, if they are not defended by the work of good influence, they will certainly succumb" to evil influences. But this is a far cry from saying Jews are evil, much less dismissing reports of pogroms.

There is nothing new about tearing quotes out of context. But when it is done to malign someone unfairly, it is inexcusable.