

## Vatican insiders declare the Pope a 'disaster'

---

Pope Benedict's repeated gaffes and the Vatican's inability to manage his message in the internet era are threatening to undermine his papacy, Vatican insiders have said.

By Nick Squires in Rome

Last Updated: 8:20PM GMT 19 Mar 2009



Pope Benedict

The Holy See is struggling to contain international anger over the Pope's claim on his first official visit to Africa that Aids "cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which even aggravates the problems".

The Pope's remarks about condoms, and a recent furore over his lifting of the 20-year excommunication of a British bishop who has questioned the Holocaust, has left him looking isolated and out of touch, prompting calls for a radical shake-up of the way the Holy See delivers its message.

The Pope is isolated and fails to adequately consult his advisers, said a Vatican source with 20 years' knowledge of the Holy See.

Another Vatican insider described Pope Benedict's four-year-old papacy as "a disaster", recalling the pontiff's previous inflammatory remarks on Islam and homosexuality.

"He's out of touch with the real world," the Italian insider said. "On the condom issue, for example, there are priests and bishops in Africa who accept that condoms are a key part of the fight against Aids, and yet the pope adheres to this very conservative line that they encourage promiscuity. The Vatican is far removed from the reality on the ground."

The Vatican's traditional culture of secrecy has made it ill-equipped to communicate its message in the internet age.

The Holy See claimed that the Pope had no idea that British bishop Richard Williamson had denied the extent of the Holocaust, but critics have pointed out that a simple Google search would have uncovered the maverick's anti-Semitic views.

"Until recently the Vatican was secretive and their way of controlling the message of the Church was to release information slowly and highly selectively through carefully worded documents," said Francis X Rocca, Vatican correspondent for Religion News Service.

"The problem now is that the internet and the blogosphere won't wait for the Vatican, so its message gets swamped."

The pope's spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, also wears two other hats – he is also the head of Vatican radio and of its television service. Observers question whether he can effectively handle such an onerous workload.

"He's got too many jobs. There's talk that he is going to go," said a third Vatican source. "You have people around the pope who seem to be out of their depth. There needs to be a major re-think of the operation, not the structure necessarily but the people."

The Vatican's press office works to a timetable from a gentler era, closing each day at 3pm, and familiarity with the internet appears barely to have penetrated the Vatican's cloistered confines.

The pontiff's message is further confused by disagreement within the ranks. Cardinals and archbishops within the Curia, the Holy See's administration, often appear to be at odds with each other, most recently over the excommunication in Brazil of doctors who performed an abortion on a nine-year-old girl who had fallen pregnant after being raped by her stepfather.

A senior Vatican figure, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, spoke out in favour of the Brazilian archbishop who announced the excommunication, only to be contradicted a few days later by Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who heads the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life.

"I think there's a good story to be told about this pope but it just doesn't get out because of the colossal ineptitude of the Vatican in terms of communications," said John Allen, a veteran Vatican analyst with National Catholic Reporter who is travelling with the pope in Africa.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandhollysee/5018013/Vatican-insiders-declare-the-Pope-a-disaster.html>