

One thought I had was, "Theology is like sausage, you don't want to see how it is made." Another thought was, "What would Britney Spears do?"

I wish I could come up with something better. Here is why.

A friend of mine is upset with Pope Benedict. "First he ticked off the Muslims" with that theological treatise at Regensburg.

"Then he ticked off the Jews," he went on to say, referring to the recent document allowing wider use of the Tridentine Mass – which he said included Scripture phrases that originated in less-than-sensitive times.

"Now he has ticked off the Protestants," said my friend, referring to the Vatican document that reaffirmed Catholic teaching about the Church and salvation.

"Who is left?" he wondered aloud. I didn't say it, but I knew an answer: Many Catholics are now upset.

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Much of the concern, I fear, has been fueled by inaccurate reporting in mass media.

An Associated Press story reported that the pope said that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

That's not what he said. The words, as finely ground and precise as any ingredient in sausage, have very precise meanings.

There is no salvation outside the catholic church, he said. That is, outside the "catholic church" – not outside the "Catholic Church."

Dr. Ann Riggs, associate general secretary for Faith and Order for the National Council of Churches, understood it well.

"The Vatican clarification is only stating their own doctrine from their point of view. There are ways in which the Catholic Church understands the Church differently than those churches born out of the sixteenth century Reformation. Rome is certainly not saying the door is closed on ecumenical dialogue. But we see there is still a lot more to talk about. There is more to discuss,"

Riggs described the new document as "an opportunity of hope." It is important, when we discuss things with others who hold different views, that we truly understand what our differences are. The secular media reporting has not helped us to find the necessary precision of meaning.

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A further complication is, to me, the surprising willingness of people to get their "theology" from the daily paper, or from Letterman or Leno, without ever once going to the original document. That's the Britney Spears part of this column. If anyone's reaction to the pope is filtered through popular media, odds are there will be no depth of understanding possible through such a channel. You don't get life-supporting medical developments from the supermarket tabloids. Or theology, either.

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If ever the method taught by Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn is applicable, it is applicable here. He taught the importance of the process: observe, judge, act. It was not judge, act, and then observe. Nor was it, observe, judge and re-act.

Cardijn liked the idea of "study circles," which helped people to understand the teachings of our faith. Good observing should be followed by careful judgment. Judgment is not easy acceptance or condemnation, but rather accomplished by comparing what is observed to the teaching of Jesus.

And that process then leads a person to take action. It's not re-action to what others may do or say, but action that flows from a person's own conscience and understanding.

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Take the time to examine how we relate to people of other faiths. The greater we understand our own tradition, the greater will be our ability to find common ground and mutual respect among people of other traditions.

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