

Vatican blasts media coverage of pope's latest book

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican on Thursday (Nov. 29) blasted the press for focusing too narrowly on whether animals were present when Jesus was born, saying media coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's new book on Jesus' childhood missed the book's key message.

Writing on the front page of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's semiofficial newspaper, Spanish theologian Jose Maria Gil Tamayo labeled the "media confusion" as another "symptom" of the "widespread and silent marginalization of God" in contemporary society.

Benedict's third book on the life of Jesus, "Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives," hit bookstores worldwide on Nov. 21 with an initial print run of 1 million copies in nine languages.

While the pontiff's book is a scholarly analysis of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' childhood and of their spiritual meaning, media coverage mostly focused on some passages in which Benedict seems to challenge cherished Christmas traditions.

In the book, the pontiff recalls that in the Gospels there is "no reference" to animals in the Bethlehem stable where Jesus was born, but adds that "no representation of the crib is complete without the ox and the ass."

Benedict also writes that the angels who announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds probably didn't actually sing, and that the three wise men could have been inspired by a "theological idea" rather than by a "historical event."

Such remarks got widely repeated online and in TV shows, with some commentators even accusing the pope of waging a war against Christmas. Even Comedy Central star Stephen Colbert weighed in, comparing Benedict to the Grinch.

According to the L'Osservatore Romano article, media focus on the presence of animals at Jesus' birth "diverted attention from the book's central message."

Such "media confusion," Tamayo writes, is a "sign of the secularization and spiritual desertification" of today's world, an issue that Benedict singled out as the church's "biggest challenge" in our time.