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# Benetton pulls kissing pope ad

## Image withdrawn after Vatican protest

**VATICAN CITY:** The Benetton clothing company quickly withdrew an ad featuring a fake photo of Pope Benedict XVI kissing a top Egyptian imam on the lips after the Vatican denounced it as an unacceptable provocation.

Benetton had said its "Unhate" campaign launched on Wednesday was aimed at fostering tolerance and "global love".

The campaign's fake photos feature a half-dozen purported political nemeses in lip-locked embraces, including President Barack Obama and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and South Korean President Lee Myung-bak.

The photo of the pope kissing Sheik Ahmed el-Tayeb of Cairo's al-Azhar institute, the pre-eminent theological school of Sunni Islam, had been on Benetton's website all day but was pulled about an hour after the Vatican's protest.

Al-Azhar suspended interfaith talks with the Vatican earlier this year after Benedict called for greater protections for Egypt's minority Christians.

A Benetton spokesman confirmed that the pope-imam ad was no longer part of the campaign.

It was not clear if the ad had been published anywhere; on Wednesday images from the campaign were unfurled briefly in Milan, New York, Paris, Tel Aviv and Rome but were quickly taken away.

Vatican spokesman the Rev Federico Lombardi called the ad an "unacceptable" manipulation of the pope's likeness that offended the religious sentiments of the faithful.

"It shows a serious lack of respect for the pope," Lombardi said in a statement that warned that the Vatican was studying measures to protect the pontiff's image.

Shock ads have long been a part of Benetton's publicity strategy, with photographer Oliviero Toscani's famous campaigns featuring death row inmates and people dying of AIDS.

In a statement, the Treviso, Italy-based clothing manufacturer said it was sorry that its image had offended the faithful and that as a result "we have decided with immediate effect to withdraw this image from every publication". — AP