

Benetton removes image of pope kissing Muslim leader

VATICAN CITY – Hours after the Vatican condemned an Italian ad campaign that depicted Pope Benedict XVI kissing a Muslim leader, the Italian fashion house Benetton withdrew the photo.

The campaign is titled “Unhate” and features doctored images of supposedly antagonistic world leaders in kissing scenes. The Vatican called offensive the image of Pope Benedict embracing Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, president of al-Azhar University in Cairo, who announced the suspension of dialogue with the Vatican earlier this year.

The ads were unveiled Nov. 16, and a few hours later the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, registered a strong protest. He condemned what he called “a completely unacceptable use of the image of the Holy Father, manipulated and exploited in the context of a publicity campaign for commercial ends.”

Shortly afterward, the image was gone from the website of the Unhate Foundation. The Italian news agency ANSA reported a company spokesman said it had withdrawn the image.

Father Lombardi said the image represented “a serious lack of respect for the pope, an offense to the sentiments of the faithful and a clear demonstration of how fundamental rules of respect for people can be violated by advertising, in order to attract attention through provocation.”

Father Lombardi said the Vatican’s secretary of state was considering what steps to take in order to guarantee “respect for the figure of the Holy Father.”

In the past, Benetton has employed shocking images in its advertising campaigns. One ad in 1991 depicted a priest kissing a nun.

Other images in the current campaign portray President Barack Obama kissing Chinese leader Hu Jintao and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu embracing

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority.