

Rigali's new old time religion

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Aug. 19, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

The theology of the body or how to keep catholics feeling guilty

Paralleling Groucho Marx's famous line, "either this man is dead or my watch has stopped," Cardinal Rigali either doesn't know that Pope John Paul II is dead or his watch has stopped and he doesn't know that he can stop running for a red hat. The old clerical gag during his time in Rome was that his cassock was always rain spotted from standing in St. Peter's Square during the ambition storms that are to the Vatican what tsunamis are to the South Seas, waiting for the lightning strike that would transform him into a cardinal archbishop.

He certainly sounded as if he were still trying to please John Paul II in his enthusiastic endorsement of a congress on the Pope's discourses on sex and marriage given early in his papacy at his weekly audiences. Consistent with John Paul II's earlier writings, these talks, published as the "Theology of the Body," were the inspiration for the recent meeting praised by Rigali as well as the foundation for an apparently enthusiastic new movement to preach these papal reflections as the Catholic ideal of sex and marriage. Rigali senses that supporting John Paul II's atavistic ideas about sex fits right into Benedict's James Cameron-like obsession with bringing an alternate world into being. The big difference is that in *Avatar* Cameron offers a three-dimensional universe while Benedict, in *Reform of the Reform*, is pushing his one-dimensional vision of the paradise of the pre-Vatican II church.

Although Pope John Paul II's meditations on human sexuality seem as tortured as he sometimes did, Rigali is betting that the new big thing will be the old big thing. You remember, that period in which Catholics were made to feel guilty just for being healthy human beings and having sexual feelings. Rigali is putting all his chips on the red by saying that the recent National Theology of the Body Congress, including its lectures, seminars, and artistic performances, "must become a campaign of human and catechetical formation."

Pope Benedict, Cardinal Rigali, and every church official clinging to the Vatican power line strung between them might well pause and reflect on the impact of this proposed full court press of John Paul II's convictions on love and human sexuality. While nobody can doubt the world's need for a renewed sense of Catholic values, with their generous pastoral understanding of the human condition, one can wonder whether the church, slipping deeper into the quicksand with each new response to the worldwide sex abuse crisis, can begin a crusade wisely or well on the basis of the theology of sex that the brooding ascetic John Paul seems to have torn out of his own soul in a form that is not only beyond humans but that will dumbfound most of them.

Pope John Paul II, for example, follows St. Augustine in believing that before the Fall in the Garden of Eden procreation was accomplished by a lofty means ? a "disinterested" love that transcended pleasure ? that included none of the disordering elements attributable to Adam and Eve who brought about "cosmic shame." For the Pope, as with Augustine, original sin brought concupiscence into the world ? tainting every sexual act and leaving human beings plagued by the morally unacceptable desire that lay at the root of sexual activity and was so problematic that it could only be tolerated as a means of bringing children into the world.

"Desire," or the erotic pull of lovers toward union with each other, remains the unacceptable element that must

be overcome in the "total giving" that Pope John Paul II defines as the essence of sexual love. Love can, as it were, keep company with desire as long as the latter is subordinated to the former and does not do what healthy human passion does: "overwhelm all else." As he had previously written, John Paul states that the will "combats" the sexual urge and also "atones" for the desire to possess and be possessed by the beloved. The "Theology of the Body" endorses the Pope's contention that real love is the antithesis of emotional desire and that a couple "must free themselves from those erotic sensations which have no legitimation in true love." Are you following me so far?

John Paul believed that any use of the other for pleasure goes against the proper order of creation so that "the desire of the body" is stronger than "the desire of the mind." Only self-control allows us to overcome the desire that he believes "limits" and "reduces" his idealized control, leaving us "ashamed" of our bodies. John Paul's highly abstract ruminations, based on a divided model of the human person, reveal much about him: the depth of his sincerity, his own spiritual struggle, and his seeming exile from the give and take relationships that go with freely living life rather than spending it agonizing strenuously over the presence of desire in human love.

Theologian Karl Rahner spoke of concupiscence as natural so that being free of it is not a requirement of human nature. That is a simple and healthy way to begin to understand something that is a simple and healthy aspect of human personality. The church's difficulties always arise when it puts aside its gift of understanding human persons and tries to make them into angels. There is an old French saying that "the man who tried to be an angel ends up as a beast." Cardinal Rigali might just want to think that over before he endorses a movement that could indeed lead the church back to the pre-Vatican II world. At Vatican II the church rediscovered its traditions of understanding rather than over-controlling the human person. The notion that this Rigali endorsed movement will bring back the old days is the scary part for it means a return to the constricted and repressive attitudes toward human sexuality that caused so much suffering for so long for so many good people. That world of confused thinking about human sexuality was also the incubator for the sex abuse crisis from which so many still suffer. The possibility of going back to that age of misunderstanding is the most ominous part of the *Reform of the Reform* now underway. As for the cardinal, he may be the preacher who talked on sex, moving an elderly Irish lady to say, "I wish I knew as little about it as he does."

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