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Pope talks condoms, sex abuse, resignation ... and movie nights

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tPope Benedict XVI is famously his own best spin doctor. In the old days, the Vatican would dispatch senior officials to try to calm the waters after the pope said or did something controversial; more recently it?s worked the other way, with Benedict himself getting the Vatican back ?on message? after one of his aides, or somebody else in officialdom, has put his foot in his mouth.

tBenedict?s chops as a teacher and communicator are once again in evidence this week, with release of the new book *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, an interview with German journalist Peter Seewald (published in English by Ignatius Press). Excerpts from the book were published yesterday in *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper.

Prior to his election to the papacy, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger sat down for two such extended interviews with Seewald. This summer, he gave Seewald an hour a day over the course of a week, and the results of those sessions run to some 180 pages covering virtually every major episode and controversy from the first five years of Benedict?s papacy.

tSo far, it?s the pope?s surprisingly nuanced comments on condoms which have excited international interest.

In chapter eleven of the book, Benedict tells Seewald that the anti-birth control teaching of Pope Paul VI in the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* remains an important witness against the ?banalization of sexuality.?

Nonetheless, Benedict says that in carefully circumscribed cases ? where the intent is to prevent the transmission of disease, not to prevent pregnancy ? the use of a condom ?can be a first step in the direction of moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants.?

tThe pontiff offers the example of a male prostitute, though the same line of reasoning could arguably be applied in cases of heterosexual couples where one partner is HIV-positive and the other isn?t.

tThat question has long been a subject of Catholic debate, even among cardinals. In 2006, the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for the Health Care Pastoral examined the question of condoms for married couples where one is HIV-positive and tentatively drew a positive conclusion, but no formal statement was issued ? in part because of PR concern in the Vatican that such a limited concession would be heard by the world as blanket approval of condoms.

In a Nov. 21 statement, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said that the pope?s comments did not come out of the blue.

?Numerous moral theologians and authoritative ecclesiastical personalities have sustained, and still sustain,

similar positions,? Lombardi said. ?Nevertheless, it?s true that they have not been heard until now with such clarity from the mouth of the pope, even if it?s in a colloquial rather than magisterial form.?

tCondoms, however, are not the only news flash in the book.

Benedict speaks at length about the sex abuse crisis, saying that the efforts of the church today are focused on three fronts: compassion and outreach for victims; prevention of future abuse, including more careful screening of future priests; and punishing perpetrators when abuse does happen.

Benedict concedes that Rome may have mishandled the crisis in some ways. He concedes, for example, that perhaps he should have spoken more often and more forefully, even if he insists that ?the essentials? have all been said. He also concedes that after the American crisis in 2002, perhaps the Vatican should have directed local bishops in other countries to examine their own records to see if similar problems existed there, rather than waiting a crisis to explode in the media and the courts.

Benedict also discusses the case of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the late founder of the Legionaries of Christ. Maciel was a longtime Vatican favorite because of his doctrinal conservatism and penchant for generating vocations, but who has how become a symbol of the crisis as the Legionaries have acknowledged he was guilty of various forms of sexual misconduct.

tBenedict refers to Maciel a ?mysterious figure,? saying that he led an ?adventurous, wasted, twisted life.? At another point, the pope refers to Maciel as a ?false prophet.?

tAt the same time, Benedict says that the order Maciel founded is ?by and large, sound.?

tDespite expressing deep shock at the ?wretchedness? and ?sinfulness? of the church revealed by the crisis, Benedict says he?s never thought about resigning because of it.

t?When the danger is great, one must not run away,? Benedict says. ?For that reason, now is certainly not the time to resign ? One must not run away and say that someone else should do it.?

tBenedict did clearly leave open the door, however, to a resignation for other reasons ? especially declining health.

t?If a pope realizes that he is no longer physically, psychologically or spiritually capable of handling the duties of his office,? Benedict says, ?then he has a right, and, under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign.?

tCanon 332 of the church?s Code of Canon Law allows for a papal resignation, stating that it must be a free choice and does not have to be accepted by anyone. Nonetheless, only a handful of popes have ever resigned, with the last case coming in the 15th century.

tIn chapter ten, Benedict strongly defends his controversial predecessor Pope Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose record on the Holocaust has long been a flash point in Catholic/Jewish relations. Benedict insists that Pius XII did not speak out more directly against the Nazis ?because he knew what consequences would follow from an open protest.?

tBehind the scenes, Benedict argues, Pius XII ?was one of the great righteous men ? and saved more Jews than anyone else.?

tAll that may suggest that Benedict XVI plans to move ahead with the beatification and canonization of Pius XII, despite protests in some Jewish and Catholic circles.

Asked about the possibility of a new ecumenical council, a ?Vatican III? after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Benedict XVI says that while there will undoubtedly be another council sometime in the future, ?at the moment I do not see the prerequisites for it.? Instead, he says, the synods of bishops are the right instrument at the moment through which bishops can participate in governing the universal church.

tTwo other themes running through the book are of interest in terms of revealing the pope?s attitudes.

tOne is clear frustration with some Catholic theologians, whom Benedict sees as pre-determined to read whatever he says or does in a negative light. In the context of the 2009 controversy over lifting the excommunication a Holocaust-denying bishop, for example, Benedict says that ?an incredible amount of nonsense was circulated, even by trained theologians.? With regard to complaints about his 2007 decision to authorize wider celebration of the old Latin Mass, the pope says that ?the polemical arguments with which a whole series of theologians assailed me are ill-considered.?

tBenedict insists that the decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops was entirely based on canonical logic, comparable to the reintegration of Catholic bishops in China ordained without the consent of the pope. Once such a bishop formally recognizes papal authority, Benedict says, the lifting of excommunication is basically automatic. In the case of the traditionalists, therefore, Benedict insists it had nothing to do with ?rolling back the clock? on Catholic/Jewish relations or the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

tThat said, Benedict also concedes that ?our public relations work was a failure,? in that the logic for the decision was not adequately explained.

tA second theme running through the book is a sort of exasperation from the pope about how his words or gestures are often over-interpreted, with their significance stretched well beyond his actual intent.

tFor example, in December 2005 Benedict XVI once sported the camauro, a thick woolen cap last worn by Pope John XXIII. Several commentators touted it as an example of Benedict?s traditionalism, but in the Seewald interview the pope says the reality was far more prosaic: It was a cold day, Benedict has a sensitive head, the camauro was lying around, and he simply put it on.

tBenedict says he?s never done so since, ?in order to forestall over-interpretation.?

Benedict XVI is 83 years old, and although there?s certainly no indication of an imminent health crisis, he nevertheless uses some language that might stoke a bit of pre-conclave speculation.

The pope tells Seewald, ?I notice that my forces are diminishing.?

tIt should be said, however, that the line comes amid discussion of Benedict?s basic good health and prodigious work ethic. (The pontiff suggests that his durability is more a result of inbred constitution than deliberate effort; he admits he never uses the exercise bike that a papal physician set up for him, saying, ?I don?t need it at the moment.?)

t Looking back to his election to the papacy five years ago, Benedict repeats a point he made at the time: he never wanted the job. He was ?so sure,? he says, ?that this office was not my calling.? He once again compares being elected pope to capital punishment, saying that during the conclave he sensed the ?guillotine? falling upon him.

tBenedict said it is the ?great responsibility? of a pope to ensure that the faith remains ?inviolate,? and that he

must be willing to brook pushback from the ?powerful constellations? of the world? in doing so. At the same time, he stresses that a pope should seek ?consensus and understanding,? insisting that ?Christianity gives joy and breadth?, and that ?someone who is always only in opposition could probably not endure life at all.?

tFinally, Benedict offers some glimpses into his private life. For example, the pope says that during the evenings he sometimes relaxes with his ?papal family,? meaning his two personal secretaries (German Monsignor Georg Gänswein and Maltese Monsignor Alfred Xuereb) and the four consecrated women from the Memores Domini community, linked to the Communion and Liberation movement, who make up his private household.

tAs part of that picture, the legendarily bookish pontiff reveals that when the ?family? gets together, they sometimes like to pop in a DVD. A particular favorite, he says, are the ?Don Camillo? movies from the 1950s and 60s, based on a line of comics created by Italian writer Giovanni Guareschi. The central characters are a parish priest in post-War Italy, Don Camillo, and the Communist mayor of his town, Giuseppe Bottazzi, better known as ?Peppone.? Camillo and Peppone argue intensely and they joust for influence over the people, but underneath it all they share a genuine affection for each other.

tFor those who prefer to celebrate Benedict?s cerebral nature, however, have no fear: The pope says that when he moved into the papal apartment he recreated his old office, including all his books, which he calls ?my advisors.? Later, in talking about his prayer life, he says he often invokes the saints, and adds: ?I am friends with Augustine, with Bonaventure, with Thomas Aquinas.? It?s the scholar-saints, in other words, with whom he obviously feels the closest bond.

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