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Benedict Ignites Condomania!

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I cringed when I saw that Pope Benedict had said something about condoms in a soon-to-be-released book. It was not the Pope?s comments I feared, but the reaction to them. Ah, here comes the Cervical Mucus Brigade, I thought. And right alongside them the Mainstream Media whose fascination with the human pelvis knows no bounds. And, there, pulling up the rear is the ?chaplain to the status quo? lefties who will denounce the Pope?s latest statement as insufficient because patriarchy is surely at work in anything that comes from the Pontiff?s lips.

So, I admit it. Pelvic theology bores me. But, naughtily, I confess it has been fun watching some among the conservative blogosphere hyper-ventilating over Benedict?s comments. The first effort to push back came from Jimmy Akin [1]at the National Catholic Register, fresh from the exercise of its heckler?s veto over the nomination of Bishop Kicanas. Akin tried to de-emphasize the significance of the remarks because they were not ?official,? writing: ?[Pope Benedict] is not engaging his official teaching capacity. This book is not an encyclical, an apostolic constitution, a papal bull, or anything of the kind.? True enough. As the Italians say, the Pope is either teaching or he is talking to the pig farmers in Sicily. This was talking to the pig farmers. But if you are wondering why some of the other rightwing ?experts? on human sexuality are not repeating this line it is because all of Pope John Paul II?s ?Theology of the Body? meanderings were also non-official. I have long suspected that the person who kept those meanderings out of the official teaching of the Church was then-Cardinal Ratzinger, but I have never been able to confirm that.

Common to all of the reactions from the right was this, or some variation of this, from Phil Lawler at ?Catholic Culture [2]?: ?There are dozens of misleading stories abroad already, about a statement Pope Benedict made in a lengthy interview. Unfortunately, there will be many more misleading comments, based on these inaccurate first reports. Did the Pope really say that condom use is sometimes justified? No; that's not what he said.? So, first establish that ?reports are misleading,? figuring that few people will ever go out, buy the book, and see what the Pope really said. Then, put on your gloss, in this case, the Pope did not say what he clearly said.

We know, thanks to the fine reporting of Austen Ivereigh [3], that there has been an on-going debate for some time within the Vatican about how to deal with the issue of condoms and AIDS, that any theologian worth his salt knew the popular perception ? that the Church banned condoms in all instances ? was wrong, not complexly wrong mind you, but simply wrong, but that any attempt to change it would be misunderstood. In the binary world in which many people live, such misunderstanding is predictable, even though Catholic theology is rarely an exercise in binary choices.

It is ironic that people like Lawler, and the American Catholic, and the editors at the so-called Catholic News Agency, all of whom regularly indulge and encourage the most pernicious type of binary calculations ? Manichaean ones ? in their tirades against ?bad Catholics,? their espousal of ?non-negotiable? political items, etc., now find themselves forced to explain the Pope?s rejection of binary analysis in this case. When Lawler asks ?Did the Pope really say that condom use is sometimes justified?? he is putting the question in a way the Pope did not put it. The Pope, like any pastor, understands that the moral life is a work in progress for us all.

Clearly, the Pope did say that in certain circumstances, condom use might be a sign of an awakening moral awareness. Does that constitute justification? You can parse that all day. The key thing is that the Pope had the courage to defy the ?either/or? way of approaching such moral issues, issues that are always, repeat always, part of a human life with all the murkiness, all the interplay of shadows and light, all the misplaced emphases and foolishness, that our human lives entail.

Dr. Janet Smith introduces [4]an analogy to explain the conundrum of understanding what the Pope is, and is not saying. She suggests the situation of a bank robber who is armed. Is it better to have bullets in the gun or not? I would suggest a different analogy. In Africa ? and in parts of inner-city America too ? there is a raging fire called AIDS. It is true that one hopes someday there will be no more fires, that the conditions that permit a fire to start will be extinguished themselves. But, such thoughts are for another time. While the fire rages, you reach for a bucket. Condoms are a bucket. It is callous in the extreme to deny the immediate usefulness of a bucket in order to speculate about how one can prevent fires in the first place.

If this latest flare-up of media scrutiny of the Church?s teachings accomplishes anything, I hope it helps people to understand that the Pope (if not all those who claim him as a champion) realizes that we live our lives in a world of grey. Grey is not a primary color. It is constituted by black and white, to be sure, and there is no denying there is evil in the world and evil choices that can be made. I worry sometimes that the hyper-teleology of natural law theory, when it is in the wrong hands, encourages an act-centered minimalism about human moral choices. I worry, too, that the rich, and important, context of Catholic teachings is frequently lost in a sound-bite world. But, then I stop and say: Moral Theology bores me, and move on.

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