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It's not just about male prostitutes

Phyllis Zagano | Nov. 24, 2010 Just Catholic

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Pope Benedict XVI, a brilliant theologian, is becoming a public relations train wreck. The latest story: male prostitutes can use condoms to prevent transmission of AIDS.

Say, what?

Male prostitutes don?t immediately come to mind when I am considering AIDS. In fact, male prostitutes don?t come to my mind at all. What was he thinking? It certainly took me a while to figure it out.

Of course, the media dust-up and subsequent blogitis has lots of folks laughing (again) at the Catholic Church. Now the Catholic idea seems to be: don?t get AIDS when you hire a male prostitute. But who hires male prostitutes? Recall, please, there?s been a bit of a homosexual scandal involving Catholic priests over the past few years.

As if things weren?t bad enough, once the pope-condom-male prostitute story began flooding newsrooms, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi personally asked the pope if he meant anything specific about choosing male (as opposed to female?) prostitutes.

According to BBC-News, the answer was ?no.? Lombardi continues, ?The problem is this...It?s the first step of taking responsibility, of taking into consideration the risk of the life of another with whom you have a relationship.?

Nice, but not exactly a sound bite. How about: ?it is immoral to infect another person with a disease.? I mean, that has a certain ring to it not lost in the clouds. Wouldn?t the church look a little better saying ?Pope aims to curb AIDS,? rather than have ?pope? and ?male prostitute? in the same headline?

There?s an even deeper problem with this story. Rather than kill it, Vatican PR incompetence extended and expanded it.

Benedict?s comment is in a book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald called *Light of the World: The Pope, the World and Signs of the Times.* To launch the book and yet again explain the headline-grabbing condom quote, Archbishop Rino Fisichella (of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization), Seewald (the book?s author), Italian journalist Luigi Accattoli and few others took the stage.

Accattoli said what the pope meant to say was that the male hooker condom idea demonstrated ?a pragmatic way missionaries and other ecclesial workers can help to defeat the AIDS pandemic without approving -- but also without excluding, in particular cases -- the use of the condom.?

Pul-eeze.

Admit it, guys. This is about Africa. Some African nations have more than a 15 percent infection rate. Tell me missionaries are only supposed to ask male hookers to be good boys when they?re being bad.

Could someone phone Rome and tell them hundreds of thousands of women are endangered every day by their HIV-positive husbands? Could someone also let the pope know how African women religious are affected by the AIDS pandemic? Does he know about the priests and seminarians who go after those women religious specifically because they are virginal and not infected with anything? (We?re not even talking here about the novices and young nuns forced to have abortions by philandering priests.)

I recognize that Benedict is a theological rocket scientist and I know he?s got a few other things on his mind. But if someone could just sit him down and explain that the days of Papal Bulls are over.

I appreciate the long treatises, I really do. But I also know that 1.2 billion Catholics and about a billion other Christians might like to hear some plain talk once in a while. It is useless to do pinhead angel population counts when the world is starving for spiritual direction and moral clarity.

The new media have driven out the old. Like it or not, Benedict is living in the world of the nine-second sound bite. His male prostitute condom comment will last a long time to come, and it?s not helping much.

The church deserves plain talk about moral issues. The Vatican?s Keystone Kops approach to public relations has just got to end.

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