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Teen critic takes on Vatican over 'war on women'

Robert McClory | Jun. 21, 2012 NCR Today

Erik Baker, the 16-year-old Evanston (Ill.) Township High School student whose essay regarding the liturgical changes [1] on *NCR*'s blog in the fall elicited about 300 responses, has produced a new combative essay. This one, based on considerable research, lambasts the Vatican on a wide range of issues, including contraception, the ordination of women, child abuse and the recent chastisement of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. All these issues are linked, Erik writes, because "the empowerment of women has always been perceived by church authorities as a threat to their power."

He recently graduated from high school, will soon turn 17 and is moving on to college at Northwestern University.

Here's the full essay.

Men Who Hate Women
By Erik Baker

The Vatican's recent report excoriating the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, a group that represents the majority of nuns in the US, has elucidated a stark truth that has become increasingly evident over the past few years: the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is deeply misogynist. The time for mincing words is over: the old male autocrats who run the church are dedicated to a platform that is defined primarily by opposition to women's rights. This latest brouhaha only makes clear that there is nothing that church leaders can stand less than the thought of women advocating for themselves.

The phrase "war on women" is admittedly overused, but nonetheless the utilization of military language is rather appropriate to describe the sustained campaign against the rights and health of women, especially in the US, that the right wing of the Church has helped to spearhead. It boggles the mind the degree to which Church leadership has demonstrated a flagrant disregard for basic human decency and a commitment to equality that flows quite clearly from the Gospel.

First there was the mandate. The infamous mandate from the Department of Health and Human Services which required employers to provide health insurance to cover contraception for female employees, and which the Church vociferously condemned for violating the religious freedom of Catholic employers. The rationale for such a policy is obvious to anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the consensus among public health professionals. There are many women for whom the Pill functions as non-contraceptive medicine, such as those who suffer from polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis, and irregular menstrual cycles. It can be used to prevent ectopic pregnancy. It can be used to save lives, and it is sanctimonious and hypocritical to invoke "religious freedom" as a justification for abridging the right of any human being to medicine which can save their life.

Beyond that, there is no argument against the use of contraception that is not entirely bankrupt. The usual argument has to do with "natural law" in the Thomistic tradition, suggesting that contraception is in violation of

the "natural purpose" of intercourse. But this is a laughably bad argument. For starters, it demonstrates the way in which Church conservatives view women as mere baby-making machines, who ought to stay silent in the church and reproduce when necessary. When applied to contraception this argument entrenches the double standard that often exists in regard to sexual expression by males and females.

But the argument is also just obviously false. As Garry Wills has pointed out, the natural purpose of food is to provide sustenance, but no one cries hellfire when food is consumed to fulfill some other purpose, like at a party, or, say, during communion. This argument is a relic of medieval philosophy and ought to be abandoned as outdated and absurd.

The other argument that is frequently used essentially suggests that if contraception is licensed, people will have sex more. Depending on how cynical one is, this line of reasoning can be viewed as naïve or repulsive. If they are viewed as naïve, the person who makes this argument is under the impression that people won't have sex if they don't have access to contraception. There is no need for explanation of the flaws with this worldview.

Alternatively, the person who makes this argument sees female sexuality as the gravest moral ill which can be released onto society. All women who have sex for purposes other than bearing their spouse a son to be proud of are whores transgressing on the natural order of things, and it is the green light that society has given to depraved acts by condoning contraception that has unleashed the inner "slut", to use Rush Limbaugh's word, in every woman. Aware of it or not, this is the implicit thought pattern in which most opponents of contraception in the media engage. There is even a bizarre sort of false consciousness which has gripped the minds of many female opponents, who have been trained to be obedient to the men who know better.

The whole incident was revealing of the Church's hypocrisy and twisted priorities. Where are the bishops who are committed enough to the value of life and human worth to cry that their religious freedom is being violated every time the state uses their tax dollars to fund the racist and murderous system of capital punishment? Where are the bishops who feel that using their money to wage wars abroad is a bigger affront to Catholic values than providing the Pill to poor working women? Perhaps that's really the heart of the matter: the mandate added insult to injury by reminding the conservatives that women are allowed to work to earn a living in our twisted modern society.

There is nothing that terrifies the Church more than female empowerment. That is why the Archdiocese of Chicago protested in 2000 when controversial priest Fr. Michael Pfleger led his church in a campaign to buy prostitutes' time as a means of educating them about opportunities for counseling and job training. That is why the Church continues without any coherent rationale to oppose the ordination of women: the idea of allowing females to preach the Word on their own behalf and to serve as community leaders terrifies those who perceive a threat to their own oppressive stranglehold on religious power.

And that is why the old men in the Vatican felt the need to censure the "radical feminist" American nuns who see the message of Christ as one of empowerment of the disadvantaged and social justice instead of patriarchy. The document chastised the nuns for focusing too much on helping poor people, when God would really have them fret more about the threat that same-sex couples who love each other being able to marry poses to the American moral order.

It is no coincidence that the misogyny of senior Church officials is frequently connected in strange ways with the most disturbing of Church secrets. Like in 2010, at the height of the second wave of the child abuse scandal, when the Vatican officially decreed that the ordination of women was a sin as grave as sex with children.

Like a few weeks ago, when a school in Arizona run by the Society of St. Pius X forfeited the state championship baseball game because their opponent's roster contained a talented girl. That whole incident threw the spotlight on the friendly hand that the Church has extended of late to the schismatic Society, known for its

virulent anti-Semitism. Its most famous member is Bishop Richard Williamson, whose excommunication was lifted in 2008, and who is best known for denying the Holocaust on Swedish television.

Like in 2009, when the Church excommunicated the doctor and mother of a 9-year old Brazilian girl who was raped and impregnated with twins by her father because they performed and facilitated the abortion that saved her life. The Church decided that the rapist, on the other hand, could remain in the Church, because in the words of the girl's archbishop, "the abortion, the elimination of an innocent life, was more serious" than the rape of a child. The twisted logic required to see Holocaust deniers and child rapists as more deserving of communion with the Church than a compassionate doctor willing to do what it took to save a girl's life is both deplorable and all too common in the official machinations of the Church today.

The reason why these connections are not coincidental is that the empowerment of women has always been perceived by Church authorities as a threat to their power, much like the revelation of the dark secrets behind the Vatican façade. Instead of welcoming change and accountability, the Church prefers to pile crime upon crime and abuse upon abuse in a truly gut-wrenching vicious cycle.

It is a serious problem, and it has been ever since the days of the church fathers, like Doctor of the Church St. Albertus Mangus, who once cautioned that "one must be on one's guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil." It is not a matter of a few bad apples. For nearly the whole of its history, the Church has been a foundationally misogynist institution.

And such a problem thus requires a foundational change. Something has to go. Eventually, I think it is inevitable that the faithful will decide that the Church's medieval attitude towards women has no place in our modern, advanced society. Let's hope that day is sooner rather than later.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/node/27394