

WORRYING TIMES FOR CHRIST'S FAITHFUL PEOPLE

GEORGE WEIGEL GETS IT WRONG: BUT WORSE, SO DOES THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH.

The opinion of respected Catholic commentator, George Weigel, on the words of Pope Benedict in *Luce del Mondo* and the debate that has followed, illustrate well the problems those words have precipitated. He writes—

“The Pope had in fact *not* said that condoms were a morally appropriate... means of AIDS prevention. Indeed, the Pope had gone out of his way... to say precisely the opposite...

“What the Pope was speculating upon was a subtlety that seemed beyond the comprehension of virtually every reporter who wrote about p. 119 of *Light of the World*: namely, the interior or subjective moral intentions that might be discerned in a habitual sinner who decided to sin in a way that was less threatening to those with whom he was sinning. Might one find here a glimmer of moral insight... from which deeper moral insights into the evil in which he was engaged might emerge in time?

“To read into that papal speculation some radical shift in the Catholic Church’s moral teaching was... a serious distortion...”¹

With respect, Weigel a) misses the point, and b) adopts the error uttered by the Pope. The point is not that the Pope said ‘condoms’ were morally appropriate, but that he had allowed that using one might achieve some good, namely, “the first step in the beginning of a moralization”.² But the use of a ‘condom’ (as ‘condom’) as explained in detail in our earlier paper, is intrinsically evil.³ *Ergo*, the Pope was conceding that one might do evil to achieve some good.

It matters not what may be—

“the interior or subjective moral intentions in a[n] habitual sinner who decided to sin in a way that was less threatening to those with whom he was sinning...”

the sinner may not do evil that good may come of it, and not even the Pope can suggest that he may.

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On 21st December 2010, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published the following note on the debate over the Pope’s words.

¹ Cf. *The Pope, the Church, and the Condom: Clarifying the State of the Question*, at <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2010/12/the-pope-the-church-and-the-condom-clarifying-the-state-of-the-question>

² This is Weigel’s translation of the German of the relevant passage.

³ Cf. *The Pope and the Question of Condoms*, and in particular Part 2 of that article at http://www.superflumina.org/PDF_files/pope_and_condoms_pt_2.pdf

ON THE TRIVIALIZATION OF SEXUALITY – REGARDING CERTAIN INTERPRETATIONS OF *LIGHT OF THE WORLD*

Note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Following the publication of the interview-book *Light of the World* by Benedict XVI, a number of erroneous interpretations have emerged which have caused confusion concerning the position of the Catholic Church regarding certain questions of sexual morality. The thought of the Pope has been repeatedly manipulated for ends and interests which are entirely foreign to the meaning of his words – a meaning which is evident to anyone who reads the entire chapters in which human sexuality is treated. The intention of the Holy Father is clear: to rediscover the beauty of the divine gift of human sexuality and, in this way, to avoid the cheapening of sexuality which is common today.

Some interpretations have presented the words of the Pope as a contradiction of the traditional moral teaching of the Church. This hypothesis has been welcomed by some as a positive change and lamented by others as a cause of concern – as if his statements represented a break with the doctrine concerning contraception and with the Church's stance in the fight against AIDS. In reality, the words of the Pope – which specifically concern a gravely disordered type of human behaviour, namely prostitution (cf. *Light of the World*, pp. 117-119) – do not signify a change in Catholic moral teaching or in the pastoral practice of the Church.

As is clear from an attentive reading of the pages in question, the Holy Father was talking neither about conjugal morality nor about the moral norm concerning contraception. This norm belongs to the tradition of the Church and was summarized succinctly by Pope Paul VI in paragraph 14 of his Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae*, when he wrote that “also to be excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.” The idea that anyone could deduce from the words of Benedict XVI that it is somehow legitimate, in certain situations, to use condoms to avoid an unwanted pregnancy is completely arbitrary and is in no way justified either by his words or in his thought. On this issue the Pope proposes instead – and also calls the pastors of the Church to propose more often and more effectively (cf. *Light of the World*, p. 147) – humanly and ethically acceptable ways of behaving which respect the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meaning of every conjugal act, through the possible use of natural family planning in view of responsible procreation.

On the pages in question, the Holy Father refers to the completely different case of prostitution, a type of behaviour which Christian morality has always considered gravely immoral (cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, n. 27; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2355). The response of the entire Christian tradition – and indeed not only of the Christian tradition – to the practice of prostitution can be summed up in the words of St. Paul: “Flee from fornication” (1 Cor 6:18). The practice of prostitution should be shunned, and it is the duty of the agencies of the Church, of civil society and of the State to do all they can to liberate those involved from this practice.

In this regard, it must be noted that the situation created by the spread of AIDS in many areas of the world has made the problem of prostitution even more serious. Those who know themselves to be infected with HIV and who therefore run the risk of infecting others, apart from committing a sin against the sixth commandment are also committing a sin against the fifth commandment – because they are consciously putting the lives of others at risk through behaviour which has repercussions on public health. In this situation, the Holy Father clearly affirms that the provision of condoms does not constitute “the real or moral solution” to the problem of AIDS and also that “the sheer fixation on the condom implies a banalization of sexuality” in that it refuses to address the mistaken human behaviour which is the root cause of the

spread of the virus. In this context, however, it cannot be denied that anyone who uses a condom in order to diminish the risk posed to another person is intending to reduce the evil connected with his or her immoral activity. In this sense the Holy Father points out that the use of a condom “with the intention of reducing the risk of infection, can be a first step in a movement towards a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.” This affirmation is clearly compatible with the Holy Father’s previous statement that this is “not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection.”

Some commentators have interpreted the words of Benedict XVI according to the so-called theory of the “lesser evil”. This theory is, however, susceptible to proportionalistic misinterpretation (cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, n. 75-77). An action which is objectively evil, even if a lesser evil, can never be licitly willed. The Holy Father did not say – as some people have claimed – that prostitution with the use of a condom can be chosen as a lesser evil. The Church teaches that prostitution is immoral and should be shunned. However, those involved in prostitution who are HIV positive and who seek to diminish the risk of contagion by the use of a condom may be taking the first step in respecting the life of another – even if the evil of prostitution remains in all its gravity. This understanding is in full conformity with the moral theological tradition of the Church.

In conclusion, in the battle against AIDS, the Catholic faithful and the agencies of the Catholic Church should be close to those affected, should care for the sick and should encourage all people to live abstinence before and fidelity within marriage. In this regard it is also important to condemn any behaviour which cheapens sexuality because, as the Pope says, such behaviour is the reason why so many people no longer see in sexuality an expression of their love: “This is why the fight against the banalization of sexuality is also part of the struggle to ensure that sexuality is treated as a positive value and to enable it to have a positive effect on the whole of man’s being” (*Light of the World*, p. 119).

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The reasoning in the passage we have shaded is flawed. The defect lies in the implication it contains that the [*subjective*] intention of the agent somehow justifies his doing of what is *objectively* evil. At the root of the business is the failure of the *Congregation*

- i. to distinguish *finis operis* and *finis operantis*;
- ii. to recognise that neither in *finis operis* nor in *finis operantis* can the moral agent act in breach of the moral law;
- iii. to acknowledge that the use of a ‘condom’ in sexual intercourse—whether natural or unnatural—(*finis operis*) is intrinsically evil *and such use adds to the evil of such acts*; and,
- iv. to reiterate the Church’s constant teaching that no matter what good intention an offender may have (*finis operantis*), the evil he does cannot be redeemed by that intention.

The elements of this doctrine have been affirmed by God’s Holy Church time without number down the ages. They were re-affirmed by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* in the following passages—

“Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their very nature incapable of being ordered to God because they radically contradict the good of the person made in His image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition,

have been termed ‘intrinsically evil’ (*intrinsice malum*): they are such always and *per se*, in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting, and the circumstances...”⁴

“Human activity cannot be judged as morally good... simply because the subject’s intention is good. [St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 148, a. 3]”⁵

The reader will observe specifically that the *Congregation* is silent on point n. iii, abstaining from a consideration of the intrinsic evil entailed in the ‘condom’ and its use. Following, apparently, the defective views of moral theologians like Professor Martin Rhonheimer, it is derogatory of ‘condom’ use only when that device is used as a contraceptive. This silence is consistent with the systematic failure of the Vatican to address the issue for more than forty years. Moreover, there is a motive for silence in the present case. For the acknowledgement that the use of the device *adds to the evil* of any illicit sexual act must reflect adversely upon the Pope’s opinion.

This premise being flawed, the *Congregation’s* conclusion is likewise flawed. Its understanding of the issues at stake IS NOT in full conformity with the moral theological tradition of the Church.

In his paper of 17th December 2010, George Weigel remarks—

“it would seem opportune for an indisputably authoritative voice, capable of speaking in the name of the Church, to publish a substantial clarification of the issues that have surfaced over the past month.”

There are not issues, *plural*, to be clarified; there is one issue only. If others have been raised, this is simply a consequence of the Pope’s error on that one. The *indisputably authoritative voice, capable of speaking in the name of the Church*, is that of the Pope. If the Pope has erred, why should we be surprised to find that the *Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith* has done the same? Both the Pope and the *CDF* have succumbed to the moral theological error of the age, the elevation of the subsidiary principle of ‘harm minimisation’ (*primum non nocere*) above the supreme principles of charity and of the moral law.

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“Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”⁶

“But who will guard the guardians themselves?” Juvenal’s satirical comment, might be amended for present purposes to read: “But who will ensure the guardians of the truth will teach the truth?” The answer for the faithful is plain: “The Holy Spirit, the Soul of the Catholic Church.” Christ’s faithful people should wait upon Him. He will not long delay to aid them in their need.

Michael Baker

24th December 2010—*Christmas Eve*

⁴ *Veritatis Splendor*, 6.8.1993, n. 80

⁵ *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 72.

⁶ *Juvenal Satires* 6: 1, 347.