White Smoke In Our Eyes

Will the new pope get religion on rubbers--and redeem the Church?

June 1, 2005 By Josh Sparber

One week after Pope John Paul II, 84, died on April 2, a gushy NBC prime-time special, *Pope John Paul II*, 1920–2005, proclaimed, “If there was a Ronald Reagan of Catholicism, this was the person.” In AIDS terms, the parallel was all too apt. Like the Gipper, JP failed to meet the terrible test of stopping HIV from becoming the greatest public-heath disaster in modern times. Still, most world media performed an instant canonization. The hagiographers didn’t mind the Pope’s staunch refusal to sanction condom use throughout his 26-year reign. During his tenure, AIDS killed nearly 30 million, ravaging the third-world nations he so pointedly embraced. Now, as ultraconservative German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 78, morphs into Pope Benedict XVI, AIDS activists are hoping to witness a miracle of sorts. For the first time since the epidemic hit, they can dream that the new pope will—against all evidence of his frequently self-proclaimed “fundamentalism” —poke holes in the Vatican’s anti-condom dogma, which holds that no action before, during or after sex can be used to prevent procreation.

“Catholic activists are hoping a dialogue on condoms will open up,” says Jeff Stone, a longtime member of Dignity USA, a gay Catholic activist group. As too the scholarly Ratzinger, who presided at John Paul’s funeral after faithfully serving for more than two decades as his doctrinal watchdog and political lightning rod, Stone takes a pragmatic view. “Given the damage AIDS is wreaking, the bishops who’ve spoken out in favor of reevaluating the church’s position on condoms and the church’s growth in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the church will be virtually forced to reconsider its stance.”

The charismatic John Paul never publicly addressed criticism of his anti-condom orthodoxy, choosing instead to promote compassion for PWAs in frequent photo ops during which he hugged children with HIV and pronounced, “God loves those of you who are suffering from AIDS.” The only coherent prevention policy he advanced was one of abstinence. “John Paul II emphasized the virtue of restraint—that sexuality should be between a man and a woman in the institution of marriage,” says William Donohue, president of the conservative Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. On this score, JP was simply following the official Catholic playbook: the 1968 encyclical Humanae Vitae, which trounces birth control.

As recently as October 2003, in a bizarrely inept attempt to counter the growing practice of condom acceptance by developing-world priests alarmed at the spread of the disease, Latin

American Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, president of the pontifical council for the family, went so far as to suggest in a BBC documentary that “the AIDS virus is roughly 450 times smaller than the spermatozoon—the spermatozoon can easily pass through the ‘net’ that is formed by the condom.” Such distortion of science has crept into President Bush’s own abstinence-only prevention policies here and abroad.

While few critics openly place responsibility for such clumsy subterfuges at the feet of the deeply learned and politically wily Ratzinger, as chief church theorist, he has slammed homosexuality as “an objective disorder” and condoms as unreliable and morally unacceptable. Still, the hope for a policy change is more than latex-thin. The Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD), an international human-rights group based in England, as well as Western cardinals such as Belgium’s Godfried Danneels, have begun to argue that condoms might be permissible if wearing them prevents an even greater evil: the transmission of a lethal virus and, ultimately, the manslaughter of asexual partner. CAFOD, now operating in 64 countries, says it ignores “over simplistic” solutions (implicitly, the Vatican’s). While it does not yet distribute condoms, it acknowledges that they are a necessary component in combating AIDS. In January 2004, Danneels went so far as to say, “If a person infected with HIV has decided not to respect abstinence, then he has to protect his partner, and he can do that by using a condom.” In previous years, such blasphemy might have led Ratzinger to silence Danneels, as he did many other men of the cloth who strayed from church doctrine.

Conservative and liberal Catholic activists are in general agreement that in the face of the global AIDS epidemic, the church risks losing all moral authority—and even greater numbers of its fast-dwindling members and donors, at least in the wealthy West—if it persists in its anti-condom creed. Dignity’s Jeff Stone says that if Benedict doesn’t deliver, “HIVers need to follow the highest authority—their own consciences—and make their own judgments after considering the church’s teachings.” Many already have. Catholic HIV positive blogger Andrew Sullivan withdrew from communion a year and a half ago. “I find the church’s opposition to the use of condoms for HIV prevention deeply immoral. I couldn’t take it any longer. But I still consider myself a Catholic—in exile.”

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