Where will Benedict XVI lead his sheep?

Martha Campbell and Malcolm Potts

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a majority of theologians and the vast majority of the laity have accepted sexual intercourse as an intrinsic part of a loving relationship. However, the white puff of smoke coming from the Sistine Chapel signifying the election of Pope Benedict XVI will turn into a black cloud for reproductive freedom for a billion Catholics. In the short term it may also hurt non-Catholics, as the new Pope’s stand on these basic human issues may encourage other fundamentalists to impose new constraints.

When Pope John XXIII was inspired to launch the Second Vatican Council in 1959,1 he let the light of reason to impose new constraints. Basic human issues may encourage other fundamentalists also hurt non-Catholics, as the new Pope’s stand on these freedom for a billion Catholics. In the short term it may turn into a black cloud for reproductive choices in countries such as the Philippines. Poor access and irregular use of contraception are one reason why, in the same societies, Catholics sometimes have more induced abortions than their protestant neighbours.9 There is estimated to be 400,000 abortions a year in the Philippines. Some 69% of North Americans believe that ‘There is a personal God’, while in the UK less than half that number (33%) share the same belief.10 Pope Benedict condemns ‘relativism’, by which he means that there is only one correct religion. By this logic, protestants are not adhering to the true Church, but no doubt Christian fundamentalists in the USA will still welcome the new Pope as a political

Humanae vitae tore the Church apart, and shocked theologians such as Bernard Haring, Charles Curran and Francis Xavier Murphy who had welcomed Vatican II. John Rock and millions of others stopped going to Mass. Pope Paul’s mistake was to reaffirm St Augustine’s teaching, identifying sex with sin. Augustine taught that newborn children were infected with Original Sin and would burn eternally in Hell unless protected by the sacrament of baptism. The infection, according to Augustine, had been passed down through the generations since Adam, like some latter-day virus. Whilst Vatican II recognised that sex could express love as well as procreation, Humanae vitae stated: “Similarly excluded [as a lawful means for controlling the birth of a child] is any action, which is either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation as an end or a means”.1

John Paul and now Benedict XVI have continued Augustine’s conservative, 1500-year-old interpretation of human reproduction. Augustine himself had lived with a mistress, who bore him a son, for many years and then abandoned them both when he converted to Christianity. He was honest enough to admit that he had never met a married man who had intercourse “solely in the hope of conception”, yet by misinterpreting human sexuality, he built an intellectual prison from which the only escape was to teach that the sole justification for sex was to conceive a child. Celibacy automatically became superior to marriage and instead of ennobling human love it degraded women.

The Church’s doctrine of subjugation of women has had appalling consequences. For example, towards the end of John Paul’s papacy, the Church received a report detailing nuns made pregnant by priests, and then encouraging them to have abortions.2 Had John XXIII lived, the Church might have followed a more humane, evidence-based interpretation of human sexuality. As it is, John Paul and Ratzinger, as his chief adviser, reinforced a millennium and a half of hostility towards women. Although many are praying for a genuine miracle, it is unlikely that Ratzinger, now 78 years old, will alter his deepest beliefs on his elevation to the Papacy.

It is unfair to criticise the adolescent Ratzinger for joining the Hitler Youth, but it is relevant to remember how the Church’s deep hostility to sex helped mislead the 1933 Bishop’s Conference in Germany into expressing “gratitude to Hitler” for suppressing “immorality”. The German church had been particularly offended by Ideal Marriage,5 written by the Dutch gynaecologist, Theodor Henrick van de Velde.

For Catholics, Pope Benedict XVI will continue to stimulate ambivalence towards contraception in the West and actively obstruct family planning choices in countries such as the Philippines. Poor access and irregular use of contraception are one reason why, in the same societies, Catholics sometimes have more induced abortions than their protestant neighbours.9 There is estimated to be 400,000 abortions a year in the Philippines.

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ally in their assault on family planning. It is almost certain that President Bush will nominate a conservative to...