



Population and Sustainability Network

A Pope for Better or Perhaps Worse

Richard Cohen, Washington Post, April 21, 2005.

Being a non-Catholic nowadays is a bit like being a non-American most of the time. Important, maybe even historic, decisions are being made and you are totally locked out. America chooses a president who gets a bee in his bonnet about Iraq, and a hunk of the world goes to war. The cardinals of the church choose a pope and maybe an even bigger hunk of the world is affected -- everything from population control to AIDS. The import is clear: We -- that's all of us -- have a new pope.

Particularly population control and the worldwide fight against AIDS -- what the pope does, how the Vatican rules, affects us all. We can fully expect that the new pope will not depart one iota from John Paul II's fervent opposition to anything other than the most rudimentary forms of birth control -- abstinence in one form or another -- including, of course, opposition to the use of condoms as a method of preventing the spread of the HIV virus. Here is where we all have a stake.

The catastrophe of AIDS and the population growth in areas of the world that can least afford it are matters that concern us all. The near collapse of the African middle class, riddled by AIDS, is a calamity. It will cost us all money, of course, and it may result in a war or two, but the immediate consequence is the death of so many people and the orphaning of children -- misery upon misery for people whose lives are already miserable enough. All over Catholic regions of the Third World, the church instructs against the use of condoms. It advocates abstinence. It fights human nature itself.

When I raised these matters in a recent column discussing the legacy of Pope John Paul II, I was barraged by e-mail, some of it favorable but some of it simply demanding that I butt out. This was none of my business, some Catholics told me. I beg to differ. It shows no disrespect to an intellectual such as Benedict XVI to engage him intellectually on these matters -- and boldly so. He is a man of firm convictions, not mere prejudices.

I am not troubled by the new pope's past -- his membership in the Hitler Youth or the German army. He was a kid and acting under compulsion. But I am troubled by his present -- his archconservative views. As a non-Catholic, I lack standing to challenge him on most issues. But as a citizen of the world, I have an obligation on matters that affect us all. On Christmas and other important occasions the pope traditionally issues a statement headed "*Urbi et Orbi*" -- "to the city and to the world." More than ever, the world will be listening.

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