

Pope's immoral stance a death sentence

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The visit to Sydney for World Youth Day (WYD), July 15-20, by Pope Benedict XVI and 300,000 Catholic pilgrims is set to become the scene for protests.

Ironically, the protests are being fuelled by the clumsy efforts of the NSW state government to suppress them — passing laws making it illegal to “annoy” pilgrims and defining “annoy” broadly enough to include having signs, or even wearing t-shirts, with messages that the doctrinally rigid pope or his followers disapprove of.

Protesting against the “thou shalt not annoy” laws and in defence of free speech is important, as is opposing the state government’s handout of \$86 million of taxpayers’ money for WYD to an extremely wealthy private organisation. A more important reason to protest, though, is the pope’s political agenda.

While the pope’s reactionary utterances on homosexuality, euthanasia, contraception and abortion are generally portrayed as “moral” rather than political viewpoints, this distinction works to undermine democracy. In 1997, for example, a law was passed by federal parliament overturning the legalisation of euthanasia in the Northern Territory, despite 80% of Australians supporting voluntary euthanasia.

Assisting the powerful

Furthermore, the pope, or Cardinal Josef Ratzinger as he was known before becoming “infallible” in 2005, played an active role in the suppression of liberal and anti-imperialist currents within Catholicism in the 1980s and '90s. In 1981, Ratzinger was appointed head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the successor to the medieval inquisition) by Pope John Paul II.

Ratzinger used the powers at his disposal — banning from teaching, sacking from the priesthood and excommunication from the Church — to silence those who opposed the drive to extinguish the modernising reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

The main targets of Ratzinger, described in an April 16, 1999 article in the *National Catholic Reporter* as “the Vatican’s enforcer”, were proponents of liberation theology — the doctrine that the place of the Church was with the poor. In Latin America, liberation theology was an important current in opposition to US imperialism.

In El Salvador, pro-poor Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down by a pro-US death squad as he performed mass in 1980, while in Nicaragua, priests served in the left-wing Sandinista government

that came to power after the 1979 revolution against US-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza.

More importantly, Christian Base communities established by liberation theologians played an important role in empowering and mobilising the masses throughout Latin America. The Vatican's suppression of liberation theology assisted in the maintenance of US hegemony over Latin America — although the influence of the doctrine can still be seen in the highly eclectic ideology of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution.

The powerful reciprocate

The US has reciprocated by incorporating the puritan sexual politics of John Paul II and Benedict XVI into foreign aid policy. This began in 1984 when then-president Ronald Reagan instituted the "global gag" rule, preventing US development aid going to any organisation that gave out any information on abortion.

This was rescinded by president Bill Clinton's administration but reinstated by President George Bush on the first day of his administration. Bush expanded the policy to prevent any US aid going to organisations that don't condemn prostitution and restricting funding for HIV/AIDS prevention to institutions not promoting the abstinence model.

These policies help sabotage the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, serving mammon as well as God, the US has campaigned against the production of cheap, generic drugs and tied US aid to the buying of expensive brand-name drugs to boost the profits of multinational pharmaceutical corporations. Western financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund even insist that poor countries producing generic drugs pay royalties to the patent-holding corporations.

At the end of 2007, there were approximately 33.2 million people in the world with HIV/AIDS. Over two thirds of these are in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 25 million people have died of AIDS since 1981 — 2.1 million in 2007. Almost 70% of people in the Third World who develop AIDS (as opposed to being just HIV positive) will die due to lack of drugs.

The number of unnecessary deaths due to US policies cannot be quantified. However, while religious believers have a right to preach that premarital and extramarital sex are immoral (and live their own lives accordingly), to claim, as both Bush and Benedict XVI do, that promoting premarital abstinence and marital fidelity is an effective way of combatting the spread of HIV, or any other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), is a deadly lie.

In September 2007, the New York Civil Liberties Union released a report on abstinence-until-marriage "sex education" programs in New York schools that, despite annual funding of more than US\$14 million from state and federal governments, appeared to make no difference to adolescent sexual behaviour in terms of decreasing premarital sex, but left teenagers in New York with higher rates of HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies than in jurisdictions with medically accurate comprehensive sex-education programs.

The NYCLU report pointed to numerous inaccuracies and religious prejudices in the material used in the abstinence-based programs. These ranged from the ridiculous (that AIDS can be spread by French kissing) to the dangerous: exaggerating the medical dangers of abortion and misleadingly suggesting that condoms were not effective in preventing pregnancy or the spread of STIs.

The material demonised homosexuality and reinforced gender roles: one program citing "financial

support” as one of the “five major needs of women” and “domestic support” as one of the “five major needs of men”.

Good example undermined

The experience of Uganda, which until recently was one of the few success stories in combatting HIV/AIDS in Africa, graphically illustrates what does and doesn't work in HIV/AIDS prevention. By the turn of the century the prevalence of AIDS had been reduced to a third of what it was in the early '90s.

While the Ugandan strategy combined promoting abstinence and fidelity with mass distribution of condoms, the February 24, 2005 San Francisco Chronicle reported that research in the Rakai district suggesting that abstinence and fidelity were actually declining in that region but, thanks to increased condom use, so was the HIV infection rate.

However, in 2003, when Bush launched his \$15 billion fund for combatting AIDS globally, the Ugandan experience was cited as an example of the effectiveness of the abstinence-based model. In 2004, Ugandan policy changed, with free condoms being recalled, allegedly for quality-control reasons, and condoms subsequently sold with a high sales tax imposed.

Sam Okware, a senior health ministry official and architect of Uganda's HIV/AIDS prevention strategy cited the financial imperatives imposed by Bush's fund as the reason for the policy change, the June 1, 2006 Independent reported. The results have been predictably tragic. By 2005, new HIV infections in Uganda had risen to 130,000 — up from 70,000 in 2002.

The demand that US AIDS/HIV prevention funds only go to organisations that publicly condemn prostitution is equally disastrous given that sex workers are a high risk group, particularly if unable to access condoms. “How can we help the girls if we condemn them?”, Maurisia Ssebuggwawo, a volunteer midwife and health worker in a slum district of Kampala told the Independent.

In 2004, Brazil rejected \$40 million in already promised US funding when it was made clear that organisations receiving it would have to denounce prostitution. Brazil's policies, among the most successful in the world, had involved working closely with high risk groups including sex workers and IV drug users, and had succeeded in limiting the number of HIV-positive Brazilians to half what had been predicted by epidemiologists.

Benedict XVI's host in Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, hails from the same conservative wing of the Catholic Church as Ratzinger. Like the pope, he periodically makes inflammatory remarks attacking Muslims. He shares the pope's puritanical views on sexuality and has even described AIDS as a form of divine retribution against homosexuals.

However, this inflexibility on sexual morality does not apply to cases of priests sexually assaulting parishioners, including children. Over the past week complaints about Pell's role in covering up sex abuse scandals have resurfaced. In 2002, at World Youth Day celebrations in Toronto, he explained his attitude: if someone from your parish asks you about the child abuse scandal within the Catholic Church, just tell them that abortion is a worse moral scandal.

Preaching intolerance, practicing hypocrisy and closely tied to the rulers of the world, the likes of Pope Benedict and Cardinal Pell deserve to be targets of protest.

P.S.

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