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Intrinsic evil vs. run-of-the-mill evil

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Essays in Theology

As we approach the Notre Dame commencement ceremonies (on May 17) at which President Barack Obama will address the graduates and receive an honorary doctorate of laws, much to the consternation of a certain segment of the U.S. Catholic community, it is long past the time when a major theological fallacy needs to be exposed and rebutted.

That fallacy consists of the assumption that only an intrinsic evil is to be held against a public figure, such as the president of the United States, a U.S. senator, a member of the House of Representatives, or the governor of one of the 50 states.

Since abortion is regarded as an intrinsic evil, anyone who is deemed pro-abortion (the assumption is that pro-choice is equivalent to pro-abortion) is, by that fact, deemed unworthy of any honors conferred by the Catholic church or any Catholic institution.

Some have even gone so far as to say that such individuals, if Catholic, should be barred from the reception of Holy Communion.

In the face of outraged protests against the invitation that Notre Dame extended to President Obama, it has been pointed out that these same people did not protest a similar invitation that the university extended to President George W. Bush during *his* first year in office.

Although President Bush had not yet launched the preemptive war in Iraq, over the strong opposition of Pope John Paul II, he had already established an unenviable record as governor of Texas in presiding over the largest number of executions in the entire country: 152.

Indeed, even in December 2000, a month after the presidential election, Governor Bush signed off on

three more executions, bringing the total number of executions in Texas that year to 40 -- an all-time record for any state since the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

The counter-argument from certain types of Catholics is that capital punishment isn't intrinsically evil; therefore, then-Governor Bush deserved a pass.

But Pope John Paul II, in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* ("The Gospel of life"), made it very clear that there are, for all practical purposes, no circumstances under which the death penalty can be imposed, no matter how heinous the capital crime.

The pope wrote that the State "ought not to go to the extreme of executing the offender except in cases of absolute necessity: in other words, when it would not be possible otherwise to defend society. Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent" (n. 56).

Ah, some say, but the pope allows for that rare exception when capital punishment might be allowed. Therefore, it cannot be intrinsically evil, because what is intrinsically evil can *never* be allowed.

But if only intrinsically evil actions are to be counted against a public official, a whole series of evils could be ignored, including the waging of an unjust war, torture, the denial of human rights, and on and on.

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Even granting the counter-argument that the pope allowed for rare exceptions, by what reasonable moral standards would 152 executions over the course of Governor Bush's two terms in Texas be considered "rare"? And by what moral standards would 40 executions in the year 2000 alone be considered "rare"?

And yet less than a year later, in May 2001, the University of Notre Dame invited now-President Bush to be its commencement speaker and the recipient of an honorary degree. Where were the same Catholics who are now protesting the invitation to President Obama? Did they also protest the honor to be accorded to George W. Bush because of his presiding over more executions in Texas than any other governor in the United States?

No, they did not. And why not? Because they did not, and do not, regard capital punishment as an intrinsic evil, like abortion, even though Pope John Paul II unmistakably condemned the death penalty, as does The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 2267), which the pope himself cited.

If the only moral condemnations of the church that a Catholic is required to take seriously are its condemnations of intrinsic evils, then why, by the same process of "logic," can we not argue that the only teachings of a pope that we are required to accept are infallible teachings?

But if that were the case, not a single teaching of Pope John Paul II in all 26 and a half years of his pontificate, would have to be accepted, because not once in his entire pontificate did he issue an infallible pronouncement.

Let's finally put the intrinsic-evil argument to rest.

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