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The Popeís Bedevilment

Richard W. Kropf | Jun. 18, 2010

It is hard to believe that someone as theologically sophisticated as Pope Benedict would resort to blaming the devil for the church?s present problems, but his allusion to ?the enemy? in a speech given to a large group of priests last week (where he bemoaned and apologized again for the sins of some of the clergy) leaves one puzzled to say the least.

There was a certain note of irony in this, inasmuch as the occasion was the conclusion of what was originally billed as ?The Year of the Priest? (whose patron saint was the 19th century French parish priest St. Jean Vianney, the ?Cure d?Ars?-- who was reported to have suffered all kinds of personal attacks from the devil). Still, the allusion seems ill-timed. Although the full-force of the pedophilia and other criminal sexual behavior may have hit the European press only this past year, it was nothing new to the Irish, nor to Americans over the past two decades.

In fact, to serious students of church history, it may be an old story. It seems that, judging from some of documents dating from the 5th and 11th centuries, when such fiery preachers and writers as St. John Chrysostom and St. Peter Damien damned clerical misbehavior and demanded drastic reforms, there have been periodic outbreaks of such problems. All this suggests that there has been a problem almost from the beginning of Christianity, the only difference being, depending on the temper of the times, how widespread or public it had become.

Why hasn?t the Church found a lasting solution by now? Perhaps, for want of a better explanation, we can blame Original Sin. Martin Luther saw human nature as essentially corrupted by it and made allowances accordingly, while the Catholic Church maintained that the damage, while serious, was more peripheral and curable by grace and self-discipline.

What Sigmund Freud thought of these particularly Christian interpretations of the Book of Genesis, I?m not sure, but he recognized that the manifestations of the human sexual drive could be, as I think he put it, ?polymorphously perverse.?

In other words, we should not be surprised by the atrocious forms it can sometimes take ? nor by the human propensity to blame someone else. That too, according to the story about Adam and Eve, was part of their sin, their refusing to take responsibility, even while they claimed the right to decide what is good or evil on their own.

Here I think I recognize the same syndrome I encountered years back when I volunteered to do ?Fifth Step? work with an AA sponsored rehabilitation center.

When alcoholics have reached this stage of the recovery process, they are supposed to share an in-depth assessment of what led up to their addiction with someone else, usually a clergy-person or counselor of some sort. I saw it as being a kind of what we called, in Catholic parlance, a ?general confession? ? a complete review of one?s life, hopefully leading to some deeper insight as to what has gone wrong.

Most of these interviews (generally taking an hour or so) went very well, particularly those of women ? often the victims of sexual abuse ? who, despite that trauma, usually had a very clear insight into their own failings and what would have to be changed in their lives. I wish I could say the same of all the men. Instead, what I often ran into was a litany of things that had gone wrong that ?wasn?t their fault? and no clue into their own thinking and what they must do to really change the booze-centered ?culture? of their free-time activities or the wider course of their lives.

So why do we find the pope, of all people, falling into the same trap and engaging in the all too predictable blame game ? singling out those priests who are duplicitous or those who are inclined to an ?objective moral disorder? (homosexuals), chiding bishops who failed to discipline them, and when all else fails, blaming ?the enemy? or the evil one? I can?t help but think it is for much the same reason as for too many of my male clients at that AA rehab center.

As much as they said they wanted to be sober, they were unwilling to quit blaming others, change their own habits of thinking, or give up their accustomed way of life. So too, the present agenda in Rome seems to be headed in the direction of firm resolutions and for a crackdown on any leniency, but no serious re-examination of or change in the ecclesiastical ?culture? that has failed time and time gain.

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