THE "PELVIC ISSUES" DEBATE: TOWARD A RESPONSIBLE MAGISTERIUM

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Being listened to the next time is a perpetual problem for leaders. What a leader says today goes into the foodprocessor for tomorrow's meal of dis/trust. So all these are political action: the Jewish leaders' "responsa," the Roman Catholic hierarchy's pronunciamentos, and Protestants' communal & conciliar statements of (1) guidance to the faithful & (2) "positions" vis-a-vis public matters....This Thinksheet's occasion is the present (Mar/87) media brouhaha over the Vatican's "recent document on reproduction," as Dan. C. Maquire (prof. of moral theology, Marquette U.) calls it in a "Special to the (Boston) Globe" 15Mar87.

1. When you're a leader (in religion or anything else) who's expected to say something, saying nothing is harder than saying just anything --as Ron. Reagan's logorrhea shows (though it's ludicrous otherwise to compare, with the Vatican's closely reasoned-calculated utterances, our present President's onto-or-offof Helicopter #1 smiling popoffs). "There you go again" is what Maguire's saying to the Vatican: "If asked by the Vatican for advice, I would implore them to impose on themselves a 20-year moratorium on pronouncements on all pelvic issues. None would dare call it neglect in view of the myriad statements of recent record. Let the Vatican attend instead to the needs of a planet in terminal peril from war and radiation. Let it speak to the earth's power holders for the 42,000 children who die daily... due to lack of minimal food and medicine. Let the Vatican reach into the storehouses of Judeo-Christian-Catholic wisdom on issues of justice and peace, and it will have a welcome and a hearing in a world that is starving for hope."

2. Learning by historical analogy is a chancy business. The Vatican was too late in sending in its counter-reformation against Luther: maybe it's worried it'll be too late on "pelvic issues" if it doesn't pronounce on pelvic issues in time to (1) rebuke effectively its own dissidents and (2) provide the nations' political processes with substantive guidance. I'm not at all unsympathetic with the problem; not at all convinced that my United Church of Christ, in its pronouncements & publications, is doing, on "pelvic issues," a better job than is the Vatican--though I agree with most of the substance of the former, & disagree with most of the substance of the latter. Further, I'm more comfortable criticizing my own religion and church than in doing so to anybody else's. In between, I'm relatively comfortable agreeing with Maguire's article from within Roman Catholicism--the best piece I've seen to date. In fact, this Thinksheet is mostly the giving of a slightly wider audience to Maguire's piece.

3. "It ain't no sin/To take off your skin/And dance around in your bones." That's what hit me first when the current argumentation was first called (by whomever I don't know) "pelvic issues"--as the pelvis is bones, the bone cavity (Greek & Latin, "bowl"; cf. Eng. "full") in which lodge all the primary organs of sexual response. I like the simple honesty & directness of this way of putting it, of locating bodily the issues, though of course the whole body physical & social is involved in the issues. To be concrete in reference--to speak, eg, of genitality & anality--is not to sacrifice dignity to clarity: what dignity can there be in false-shame euphemisms (eg, an "affair") & displacements (eg, "sleeping with")? Rightly, children are beginning to be taught to defend-protect their pelvic region from "bad touching." Being explicit about pelvic activity (eg, vis-a-vis unwanted pregnancy & AIDS) passes the tests of intelligence & kindness and need not weaken appropriate feelings of shame & mystery.

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4. The article leads the GLOBE's "FOCUS-Editorial" Sunday section, which is a cross between "OpEd" (started by the N.Y.TIMES) & the N.Y. TIMES' "News of the Week in Review." For N.England, the most prominent newspaper spot for a thinkpiece; doubtless, for Card. Law, the worst possible spot for this thinkpiece! "Vatican Birth Decree Casts a Long Shadow: Church ethics-by-edict message puts it on a battle footing with Catholic, non-Catholic institutions." A titling the contents fulfil. The document's not just in-house, but "a serious effort to lobby the nations of the world to limit the reproductive choices of all citizens, Catholic and non-Catholic alike." It should give Anthony Podesta (People of the Am. Way) a second target, in addition to the Protestant religious right--but I doubt that any anti-Catholic blasts will come out of this quarter of the political heavens. But remember that before Vatican II & tepid-Catholic Pres. JFK, fear of Catholic political influence was a powerful political factor, & not all the fear was paranoia. Sad that we've gotten this occasion to revive antiCatholicism, at the same time certain events (Wall St., Israeli spying on the USA) have given occasion to revive antisemitism.

5. "The baggage of influential lobbyists should be open for inspection," and "this particular Vatican intervention is infelicitous on at least five counts: (1) It damages the rapport between religion and science; (2) It complicates the public service of the 600 Catholic hospitals in this country and others elsewhere; (3) It casts new shadows on Catholic politicians; (4) It perpetuates the excommunication of women from Catholic thought; and (5) It reinforces the Vatican's penchant for doing ethics by edict, rather than by argument, in pelvic matters." That's the article's indictment, and outline.

6. It's materialistic to determine what I'm going to call pelvic ethics on the basis of pelvic action alone. Besides being rooted in biology, we humans are rooted in history, psychology, and divinity. Not that the document denies any of these transphysical roots; but it gives them only adjunctive voices. "In this materialistic and deterministic view, biology is ethics. Taken to its logical nadir, such a vision would paralyze medicine," crippling bioethics. Rather, "biology is not destiny when it comes to birth control and to the solution of some infertility problems." If a Catholic hospital follows the document, can it honestly solicit funds from the general public; can it meet medical and legal standards; in short, should Catholic hospitals exist?

7. Under pressures from this document, could any Catholic run for President (or lesser offices)? O'Connor & Law would be even tougher than they were in '84! "Catholic candidates may have more to fear from the hierarchy's obsession with sexual and reproductive orthodoxy" than from antiCatholicism. Let's call it pelvic politics, on the model of Kate Millett's SEXUAL POLITICS.

8. "Vatican theology is written by celebate men at their desks," though "celibate experience is...perhaps the least relevant experience for the issues at hand." "There is no morally permissible reason to exclude the experience and intelligence of women from reproductive ethics," as both their identity & their inner/outer activity are more involved than are men's. "Men do not get pregnant, give birth, nurse or have abortions." "Why would God in His/Her gracious wisdom give moral insight on sexual and reproductive matters only to those who are not involved in sexuality and reproduction?" "A monopod approach to truth is perilous": hierarchy is only one leg of the tripod, the others being research (theologians) & the laity "with their lived experience and reflection."