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Sir Elton John and Others Pontificate on Papacy

by Douglas A. Sylva

Pope Benedict XVI was recently asked to attend a rock concert seeking to draw attention to the plight of Africans but it turns out that some of the rockers are unhappy with the invitation. Sir Elton John and others think even though the continent is showered with 700 million condoms a year, the Catholic Church and their opposition of contraception is responsible for the spread of AIDS and poverty.

I would wager that at least a couple of the horsemen of the apocalypse must be all saddled up and ready to go, if Elton John has eclipsed Pope Benedict XVI as a moral authority, but that appears to be exactly what happened this past week in England.

Here's the background: it appears that an ageing rock-star named Sir Bob Geldof has hatched a scheme to hold a concert called Live 8, in order to draw the world's attention to the plight of Africans. But along with Sir Paul McCartney, Bono (of course), Madonna, and a host of other stars, Geldof had the temerity to invite Pope Benedict XVI, whose musical tastes range from Gregorian chant to Mozart, to the event.

It's hard not to be charmed by Geldof's reasoning, communicated in all of its 60s splendor: "His song is the theology of the poor. It would be a great first gig for the Pope." But charmed many of the leftists were not. In fact, a campaign has begun to have the Pope uninvited, ostensibly because the Catholic Church opposes the use of condoms to prevent AIDS, and is therefore a primary cause of the catastrophe in Africa, which goes to show just how deeply this new slander against Mother Church has sunk into the public consciousness.

And this is where Sir Elton John (apparently all British rock stars are knighted for surviving into middle age) enters the picture. His opinion was actually sought out in this matter. Is the Catholic Church responsible for spreading AIDS in Africa, and therefore killing Africans? According to Sir Elton, "When you take into consideration their [the Church's] views of contraception, and how this affects the spread of AIDS...it adds to the general poverty of the region, doesn't it?" The media reported that he "voiced concern" over the invitation.

A group called the National Secular Society then published an open letter from its executive director, Keith Porteous Wood, in which Wood fulminates that, "the Pope stands accused in many quarters of doing almost more than any other individual on the planet to increase poverty and suffering in Africa. His intransigent opposition to the use of condoms to fight AIDS is a scandal of epic proportions."

It would be easy to dismiss both John and Wood, but to ignore these charges, as they gain ever-wider acceptance, would be foolish, as well as unjust to Pope Benedict, Pope John Paul II, and to all Catholics who work to make the worldwide Catholic charities and health care systems so merciful and effective.

So what are the charges? "AIDS is devastating Africa. Condoms are the only known barrier to the virus. The Vatican has spearheaded the restriction of condom distribution and actively discouraged their use."

Has the Vatican "spearheaded the restriction of condom distribution?" It is difficult to know exactly what this means. Over 700 million condoms are distributed in Africa every year. The Vatican has no political power to stop this. Thus, whether condoms have helped or hurt AIDS infection rates is solely the responsibility of condom advocates, not the Vatican.

Does the Catholic Church discourage the use of condoms? Yes, but only as part of its complete sexual morality. If people are chaste outside of marriage and faithful within marriage, they will not need condoms to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. The

Catholic Church has every right – even an obligation – to teach how the moral law and the natural law coincide: Stay true to your wife, and you will be safe.

To blame the Church, therefore, for the spread of any sexually transmitted disease, it would be necessary to prove that people are ignoring the first, essential injunction (stay chaste or faithful), but are slavishly obedient to the second (don't use condoms).

By the way, if you are interested in Sir Elton's qualifications to discuss AIDS in Africa, his website claims that he has established the Elton John AIDS Foundation, whose two full-time employees appear to be responsible for organizing fundraisers such as "the glamorous and highly successful Annual White Tie and Tiara Ball," as well as "charity clothing sales (often precipitated by Elton having a massive wardrobe clearance)."