

May 16, 2005

Kristof Defames Pope with Unfounded Accusations

By Douglas A. Sylva

The New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof has repeated a claim that that is quickly becoming accepted as an empirical truth: The Catholic Church is responsible for millions of AIDS deaths in Africa because of its refusal to distribute condoms. But a look Kristof's column shows there is nothing empirical about his claim.

You might have noticed, if you bother to pay attention to such things, that there was a conspicuous addition to the "on the other hand" list used by journalists during the coverage of Pope John Paul II's death. You know the list: "Even though so many people apparently loved him, the Pope did not improve the role of women in the Church, the Pope alienated homosexuals," and so on.

What is striking about the addition to the list is that it does not solely concern internal Church doctrine or structure. It is, in fact, an empirical claim: Because the pope was against condoms, he was responsible for the spread of AIDS in Africa. The claim first garnered widespread attention when made in a 2003 British Broadcasting Corporation documentary called "Sex and the Holy City." It was repeated both on air and in print during the mourning period for John Paul II. The New Statesman said, colorfully, that John Paul "did more to spread AIDS in Africa than prostitution and the trucking industry combined"; the Independent said that "millions have died in Africa" because of the Pope.

Now Nicholas Kristof has repeated the claim in his New York Times column, with a warning to John Paul's successor: "Let's hope that Pope Benedict XVI quickly realizes that the worst sex scandal in the Catholic Church doesn't involve predatory priests. Rather, it involves the Vatican's hostility to condoms, which is creating more AIDS orphans every day." (Never mind that, just last month, Kristof blamed George W. Bush and his "fundamentalist" Protestant beliefs for AIDS in Africa.)

This will be the new slander: If Pope Pius XII now resides in the popular imagination as "Hitler's Pope," John Paul II and Benedict XVI will go down as the AIDS popes. According to Kristof, their infamy may be even more richly deserved, since he makes sure to point out that the 20 million people already dead from AIDS is a "toll greater than three Holocausts."

The first thing to notice about all of these articles is that this empirical claim seems to depend almost solely on personal testimony, most especially the testimony of supposedly sincere Catholics agonizing over choosing between the strict orthodoxy of an unsympathetic church and the life-saving promise of the condom. A Reuter's article published in April begins with the story of a girl named Rose: "Rose was raised as a good Catholic schoolgirl by her grandparents, but now the 18-year old orphan survives by selling sex in a Ugandan slum. . . . 'I'd like to follow the Church's teachings, but with condoms you can stay safe.'"

Kristof finds a priest willing to say that, "If I were pope, I would start a condom factory right in the Vatican," and a seminarian willing to ask, "What would Jesus do? He would save lives. If condoms will save lives, then he would encourage their use."

None of this testimony constitutes an argument, and can be discarded as journalistic boilerplate, a well-worn formula that faith conflicts with scientific truths (although it would be nice to know why Rose seems to have no qualms about her chosen profession, but loses sleep over condoms).

Beyond anecdote, the slander depends upon the assumption that the widespread distribution of condoms reduces AIDS infection rates. After 20 years of effort, however, condoms have worked nowhere in Africa, so the slanderers must appropriate the experience of Uganda –

where abstinence was preached early and often – and turn it on its head. The Reuters article says that, "Rose's native Uganda is often cited as an African success story in fighting AIDS. . . . Many Ugandans attribute President Yoweri Museveni's government's success to its early frankness about condoms."

But the reporter does not show much confidence in his own assertion about condoms, placing it in the mouths of unnamed Ugandans. Even Kristof can only muster the courage to say that Uganda "relied in part on condoms." What are the other parts of the success? Why won't he say?

Perhaps these writers should temper their conclusions – Kristof intones that historians will count the Church's "anti-condom campaign as among its most tragic mistakes in the first two millennia of its history" – to the level of uncertainty they seem to possess about their own premises.

One other point that they fail to mention: The Catholic Church cares for one quarter of the world's AIDS patients. So when that UN condom slips, and you get AIDS, when that EU condom breaks, and you get AIDS, or when that USAID condom makes you feel invincible and you take stupid risks, and you get AIDS, the Church will be there to care for you. And that includes Rose, who admits that, tragically, "I may already be sick."