

There He Goes Again

George De Stefano (April 23, 2009)



The Pope, Condoms, and Necessary Satire

Sabina Guzzanti, the political satirist who may be the most outspoken woman in Italy, rocked Piazza Navona last July with a speech that was incendiary even by her standards. Speaking at a left-wing rally, she took on the increasing intrusion of the Vatican into the secular sphere, and blasted the pope for his relentless attacks on gay and gender-variant people.



After warning the crowd that within 20 years, if current trends continued, the Vatican might be deciding who gets to teach in Italian schools, she dropped the Q-bomb: "But then, within 20 years the pope will be where he ought to be — in Hell, tormented by great big queer devils, and very active ones, not passive ones."

When I heard about Guzzanti's remarks, I thought, bravissima, you bold and fearless bad girl. (I also thought of the South Park movie, "Bigger, Longer, Uncut," which featured a great big and very gay Satan — one of my all-time favorite cartoon characters.) I knew she'd catch hell for mocking the pope. But I never expected she might face prison. Italian law, or rather, the 1929 Lateran Accord between Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship and the Vatican, defines the pope as a "sacred and inviolable person." So insulting him is a criminal offense, punishable by one to five years in jail. And sure enough, prosecutors in Rome actually recommended that Sabina Guzzanti be indicted because of what she said in Piazza Navona.

Nothing came of this, fortunately. Outrage in Italy, even among conservatives, as well as incredulous coverage in the international media, apparently convinced Justice Minister Angelino Alfano not to indict a citizen of a purported democracy for speaking her mind.

Guzzanti, to her credit, hasn't been intimidated. She continues to speak out -- against the Vatican, Berlusconi's abuses of power, and censorship. But so does the Pope — now, against condoms. Last month, on a flight to Africa, he told reporters that condoms, far from halting the spread of HIV, were making the situation worse.

Though preventing HIV entails more than condoms, they are essential to any successful HIV prevention effort. There is absolutely no question that condoms, when used correctly and consistently, prevent people from contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. But the pope, having recently attacked gay and transgender people as a greater threat to humanity than global warming, doesn't pay much attention to scientific consensus.

Leading scientists, HIV specialists, frontline health care workers, as well as government leaders and politicians, denounced the pope's wrong-headed and irresponsible comments. The Lancet, one of the world's leading medical journals, ran an editorial that pulled no punches in its criticism:

"The Catholic Church's ethical opposition to birth control and support of marital fidelity and abstinence in HIV prevention is well known. But, by saying that condoms exacerbate the problem of HIV/AIDS, the Pope has publicly distorted scientific evidence to promote Catholic doctrine on this issue."

(Sabina Guzzanti - Piazza Navona 7/8/2008)

UNAIDS, the United Nations Population Fund, and the World Health Organization issued a joint



statement noting that "the male latex condom is the single, most efficient, available technology to reduce the sexual transmission of HIV."

Vatican spin doctors tried to calm the furor by claiming the Pope actually had said something else. The Vatican's media chief, Federico Lombardi, posting at the Holy See's website, wrote that what the pope really said was that there was "'a risk that condoms...might increase the problem.'"

But The Lancet didn't buy it. "Whether the Pope's error was due to ignorance or a deliberate attempt to manipulate science to support Catholic ideology is unclear. But the comment still stands and the Vatican's attempts to tweak the Pope's words, further tampering with the truth, is not the way forward. When any influential person...makes a false scientific statement that could be devastating to the health of millions of people, they should retract or correct the public record."

But of course the pope and the Vatican aren't even considering the possibility of a retraction. Instead, they're now attacking their critics with predictable boilerplate rhetoric. This week the Vatican put out a belligerent press release accusing the pope's critics of trying to "intimidate" and "silence" him. The statement didn't deal with the substance of the criticism of the pope, or address the scientific consensus about the effectiveness of condoms.

The Vatican has gone so far as to say that HIV workers who have dedicated themselves to curbing the epidemic in Africa are some kind of latter-day colonialists imposing decadent, foreign values on Africans. That nonsense was neatly disposed of by Rebecca Hodes, of South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign, who said the pope's opposition to condoms "conveys that religious dogma is more important to him than the lives of Africans."

As someone with some 20 years of experience in HIV education and prevention, I was appalled by the pope's remarks and heartened by the response to them. As a gay man and a nonbeliever, I'm fed up with his grotesque rhetoric and the arrogance and intransigence of the institution he heads.

That brings me back to Sabina Guzzanti and the threat to prosecute her for having insulted the pope. That Italy would even have such a law on the books, more than 60 years after the fall of Fascism, is incredible. The notion that an individual can't be criticized because he is a "sacred and inviolable person" invites laughter and derision – in a word, satire. And since satire is a powerful weapon against the pompous and the tyrannical, I hope Guzzanti, and certainly not only she, will continue to wield it. After all, it'd be a shame to pass up the ample opportunities this current pope no doubt will continue to provide.

(Sabina Guzzanti - "Catechismo by Ratzinger")



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