

The Elephant in the Living Room

by Russell Shaw - January 27, 2011

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Contraception is the elephant in the living room of contemporary Catholicism: Everybody knows it's there, but few people care to acknowledge the fact. Meanwhile, the accumulating pastoral damage that results from this state of collective denial is painfully real.

Partly it arises from the circumstance that even churchgoing Catholics today live in a state of make-believe. "We're all one big happy family, aren't we?" On the matter of contraception we most certainly aren't, and the strain of pretending otherwise saps energies and weakens the bonds of ecclesial communion.

It gets worse. According to poll data, 75 percent of Catholics in the United States receive the sacrament of penance – go to confession, that is – less than once a year. In many cases, that's never.

There are many reasons for this, but contraception obviously is one. Contracepting Catholics don't wish to confess contraception, because they're afraid of being told it's wrong and have no intention of giving it up. But they don't wish *not* to confess it, because they know the Church rejects it and not confessing it would be dishonest. Their non-solution to this dilemma is to stay away from confession entirely.

What to do about this state of affairs? Would a comprehensive public airing of the problem help? Note that I raise this question as someone who supports the Church's teaching on contraception and has publicly defended it many times. I support the teaching on two grounds: first, the firm and constant teaching of the Magisterium over many centuries; second, the powerful and sophisticated rational argument against contraception developed by Germain Grisez and his colleagues in the "New Natural Law Theory" school.

But – to repeat – would public discussion of the issue at this time actually help? That's not so clear. The most recent experience in this line suggests the answer may be no. I refer to the furor that erupted two months ago over Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on condom use to prevent the spread of HIV-AIDS. The pope's comments (in a book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald called *Light of the World*) were highly limited in scope and did not concern sexual relations within marriage; the focus instead was on relations outside the marital context in which one of the partners is HIV-infected.

Benedict made the following points: Sex outside marriage is itself wrong; condom use to prevent the transmission of HIV is not "a real or moral solution" to the AIDS problem; still, if people are determined to do what is wrong, using a

condom could at least be a "first step" toward a responsible approach to sex that recognizes responsibility for the other party.

For the pope to say this was indeed something new, although it was hardly an earth-shaking utterance that turned the contraception debate on its head. In view of the flap that followed, however, you could be excused for not understanding that.

The blame for this confusion is widely shared. Acting with authorization from the Vatican publishing house (yes, you heard that right – the Vatican publishing house), the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, got the media frenzy rolling by breaking the embargo on the pope's remarks and compounded the problem by leaving out a key passage that made his meaning clear. Here was another reminder, if one is needed, that Vatican communications are a shambles. Secular journalists, unaccustomed to having to think rationally about issues of morality, rushed to serve up sensationalized coverage. Nothing new about that, either. The journalists received little or no help from the Holy See, but were aided and abetted by a bevy of Catholic commentators ready and willing to shoot from the hip. Then, to complete the foul-up, some of these latter, on the conservative side, fell to belaboring one another for having voiced a new idea or two. Some went so far as to take the pope to task.

The result: A month later, the Vatican was still issuing clarifications of something that should have been clear at the start.

If this messy episode did nothing else, at least it made it clear that the elephant in the Church's living room – contraception, that is – is still there. In doing so, it raised the question of what, if anything, can be done about it.

An Austrian bishop named Klaus Kung suggested the time may have come when a papal encyclical on sexual morality would help. But he spoiled it by adding the thought that an international commission should be established to help prepare such a document. The suggestion contains undertones of the "papal birth-control commission" that did so much to tilt the playing field against Pope Paul VI's anti-contraception encyclical *Humanae Vitae* even before it appeared. Do we really want to go through that again? But can we just sit and wait, hoping against hope that sooner or later something or other – heaven knows what – will turn up to change things for the better?

I have no evidence, just a sneaking suspicion, that Benedict might have been asking himself that question when he floated his little trial balloon with Seewald. If so, he now has a lot more data to mull. One thing is for sure: If you leave an elephant in the living room long enough, eventually you'll have an awful mess to clean up.