

Chicago Sun Times

Friday, June 24, 2005

Church Not Speaking Up for Women

By Andrew Greeley

Why are there no Catholic sermons, no pastoral letters, no statements from the national hierarchy, no papal encyclicals about the abuse of women? Judging from the almost universal silence of Catholic clergy and hierarchy, there must be no serious sins of abuse of women.

The clergy and hierarchy denounce serious sins, right?

The basic premise must be that women are fundamentally equal to men, different perhaps in some ways, but equally human and equally endowed with all the same inalienable rights, as Mr. Jefferson said, with which men are endowed. "Neither Jew nor gentile, neither Greek nor Roman, neither male nor female, but all one in Christ Jesus," as St. Paul said.

Therefore women are not slaves of men, sexual playthings to be used and discarded, unpaid servants to do the work beneath a man's dignity, chattel with no rights who exist at the pleasure of men. Most women for most of human history have been doomed to this subhuman status. In most places in the world today they still are. Do clergy and hierarchy approve of this principled denial of human dignity? If they do not, why are they silent?

Rape is a grievous sin, even spousal rape, especially spousal rape. Date rape is a mortal sin. Physical abuse of a spouse is a grievous sin. So is habitual verbal abuse. Incestuous abuse of daughters, sisters and nieces is a mortal sin. Sexual harassment in the workplace or anywhere else is a mortal sin. Vile sexual "locker room" conversation that demeans women is a serious sin. Job discrimination against women is a grave sin. Contempt for women is a serious sin. Treatment of women like they are sex objects is a serious sin. Sexual exploitation of women is a mortal sin. So too is the practice of the rich and famous of replacing a loyal, faithful wife with a new "trophy wife."

Is there a priest anywhere in the world who would argue publicly that any of these behaviors is not a mortal sin? A bishop? A cardinal? A pope? Then why is there so much silence about them? Surely they are not so naive as to think that such sins are infrequent. Read the survey data, talk to cops, consult with counselors of battered women, if you have any doubts.

Those sins are legion in our civilized Western world. Clergy and hierarchy delight in sweeping denunciations of “sins of the flesh” and “sins against life.” But one hears very little condemnation of sins against women’s flesh, against the bearers of life, sins that are even in this country routine, commonplace, every-day. Why not, I wonder.

I will take the right-to-life people a lot more seriously when they also speak out on the full equality of women and the obligation of society and church to protect and defend their full range of human rights and to protect their full humanity from abuse.

Some men (even, sad to say, priests and bishops) think that they are not really men, unless they are the “boss,” unless they have the right to be in control, to make decisions, to give orders that women, perhaps after some discussion, must obey. They apparently can’t comprehend that unless a woman is an equal partner, she becomes a second-class human, someone on the slippery slope toward chattel slavery.

In other parts of the world the situation is much worse. A daughter is someone her father may dispose of as he sees fit. Young women are forced into marriages they do not want. Teenage children are sold into prostitution – in some countries for the pleasure of Western “sexual tourists.” Girls on the edge of puberty are given in marriage, only to have their bodies torn apart by pregnancies for which they are not yet ready physically. Fathers and brothers have every right to kill a woman who has somehow brought disgrace to their family.

The Catholic Church hardly approves of such behavior – which ceased only recently in some deeply Catholic countries. But how can it remain silent as long as it happens anywhere in the world?

Humankind changes slowly. In the West we deny the right of a human person to own another human person, though John Paul II was the first pope to say that slavery is intrinsically evil. Will Benedict XVI be the first pope to say that the abuse of women is also intrinsically evil? I sure hope so.

Copyright © 2005 Digital Chicago Inc.