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Against Tobacco; For Life

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In August, 2003 thousands of tobacco-control and health advocates converged upon Helsinki for the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health. I was the only "official" Roman Catholic attending. Three months later, in mid-December, 2003 I attended the National Conference on Tobacco or Health in Boston. Over 3,000 people participated. Again, I was the only person there doing anything on tobacco with any Roman Catholic Church body.

At the Boston meeting I attended a session entitled: "Faith Perspectives on Building Partnership with Tobacco Control Coalitions." Rev. Cynthia Adams, the Native American Director of the "Alcohol and Other Addictions" Program of the United Methodist Church discussed its national campaign to help people be freed of tobacco. She was joined with Rev. DeWitt Williams, the Health Coordinator of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The Adventists have been one of the pioneering churches in creating religiously-grounded, effective programs around addiction. A third presenter, Bishop Douglas I. Miles of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Baltimore, detailed the efforts of the "faith community" in Baltimore to ensure "the vision of a tobacco free society of communities in which youth are not led to addiction and adults do not die prematurely from addiction."

As I listened to the efforts of these denominations, including their efforts to work together (such as working recently to increase the tobacco tax in Maryland), I was struck by the total absence of any mention of the Roman Catholic Church. The speakers mentioned the involvement of "ministers, rabbis and imams" but never once was anything said about the efforts of "priests" (or women or men religious) to help people quit or to challenge the tobacco companies about their efforts to get young people and less-educated people here and abroad to use tobacco.

Simply stated: tobacco is not on the radar screen of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Problem of Tobacco

In the United States, the Center for Disease Control says, 400,000 die annually from smoking. Yet the World Health Organization says that every 6.5 seconds someone dies from tobacco-related causes. The tobacco companies make the only known product which, if used as intended, will kill. Despite this, the only "official" church teaching that I have found that even addresses tobacco in any way can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It makes no mention of nicotine's addictiveness nor the tobacco industry's efforts to get people addicted; rather tobacco is treated only once, under the

virtue of “temperance.” It seems that, for the official Catholic Church, a little tobacco is not a bad thing. Yet, according to research reported in a 2000 issue of the British journal Tobacco Control, a “little” tobacco for some 12- and 13-year-olds is enough to show evidence of addiction within days of their first cigarette. “There’s been a suspicion that many people become addicted very quickly, but this is really the first hard evidence that we’ve had that this occurs,” said Dr. Richard Hurt, Director of the Nicotine Dependency Unit at the Mayo Clinic.

Moving more specifically to the pro-life issue of abortion, data shows that cigarettes cause up to 141,000 abortions in this country alone. While the partial-birth bill thankfully will save 1,000 lives a year and involved much “Catholic” lobbying on the recent vote, it is sad to know that nothing is being said about the hundreds of thousands being killed by tobacco during the same period of time. Smoking is a form of birth control as well. Each year in this country smoking during pregnancy causes 61,000 cases of low birth weight (20-30 percent of all low-birth weight babies), 4,800 perinatal deaths, up to 14 percent of preterm deliveries and 2,200 deaths from the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Babies of smoking mothers go through the symptoms of withdrawal upon being born. A 1996 Emory University study showed that pregnant women smokers are 50% more likely to have mentally retarded children and those smoking a pack a day were 85% more likely to give birth to a retarded child. A 1998 study from the Minnesota Cancer Center showed that a cancer-causing substance from tobacco is transmitted to fetuses by pregnant smokers.

Why people involved in the pro-life movement have not addressed the issue of tobacco baffles me. One would think that, even apart from addressing the issue of the health-hazards connected with tobacco use, at least concerns about the dangers of tobacco during pregnancy might be addressed. As early as 1996, the Executive Director of the pro-life Christian Defense Coalition tried to address the contradiction. However, after lobbying six major pro-life groups to take on tobacco, Rev. Patrick Mahoney said he got “nowhere.” Instead he heard one excuse after another: “That’s not our issue. . . We’re so involved right now with A, B, C. and D. . . . We’ll take a look and see.” All effectively dismissed him.

The Catholic Church Stands Outside the Conversation

In 1997 I attended the 10th World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Beijing. There I gave a paper on the role of religion in tobacco control. Again, I found that every major religion had at least some of its official tradition address the harms associated with tobacco: except the Roman Catholic Church. The questions were constellated in five areas: 1) Whether or not the group or its parent organization had made any morality statement regarding tobacco; 2) Issues related to tobacco investments (screens, holding stocks, divestment and shareholder involvement on tobacco concerns); 3) Smokefree workplaces; 4) Acceptance of ads or monies from tobacco interests as well as whether tobacco entities had ever been honored by the religious institution; and 5) Personal impressions and rationales as to whether religious leaders had been silent or vocal on the issue of tobacco. The samples were made using the official publications of the various

groups (i.e., the Kennedy Directory for Catholic dioceses and religious congregations, the Catholic Health Association's membership list, the major denominations belonging to the NCC and the AHA Guide to the Health Care Field).

Only 13.95% of the Catholic groups had any kind of statement. This includes the one diocese that responded to the question: "Have you made a moral statement against tobacco usage?" with the answer: "sort of." Outside of this "sort of" response, not one Catholic diocese noted any kind of moral position related to tobacco. The stance of Catholic groups contrasts sharply with two-thirds (66.67%) of the Protestant groups that indicated their denomination had a moral position regarding tobacco. A key rationale offered for anti-tobacco use by such groups as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Disciples of Christ, and the Southern Baptists comes from St. Paul's reminder to Christians that the body is the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20). For its statement, the American Baptist Church not only raised a moral concern about smoking for its members; it also notes the "Christian responsibility" of its members "to speak out against those who would seek profit and wealth by promoting the use of a substance shown to be destructive to health and life."

In May, 2000 I was deposed by the Defendants' attorneys in the Engle Case, based in Florida. This case addressed the issue of tobacco companies' failure to adequately warn and/or admit health problems related to tobacco use. In the midst of the deposition, a Philip Morris attorney asked me "my church's" position on tobacco. Referring to the study I had made a few years before, I noted that the only official mention can be found in #2290 of the Catechism: "The virtue of temperance disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine." When asked why I never tried to impact Catholic Church teaching on the matter I told the lawyer that I actually had never thought of it because I didn't think I'd be heard. At the same time I told him that I thought it was a great idea to try.

Upon my return I wrote a letter (May 11, 2000) to the then-President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston. I asked him to "use your good offices to change the present tenor of Catholic teaching related to tobacco use in light of the fact that its practices undermine the seamless garment of life. I don't know if this would mean developing something for the U.S. Church or advocating for such at the Vatican." I also offered my serves "to work with you on developing such teaching."

Two months later Bishop Fiorenza replied. He noted that "before any project or statement can be placed before the membership of the Convergence, it must move forward with the observations and recommendation of the appropriate committee of Bishops." He said he had forwarded my letter to the committees of the Conference working with health and life concerns.

Three years have passed. No action has been taken at the U.S. level nor the level of the Vatican. The pandemic continues. Meanwhile more of us prematurely lose loved ones and bury them in the Catholic Church never having heard a word to stop such a preventable disease.

In November, 2001 I participated in the efforts of Non-Governmental Organizations in Geneva to impact what became the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control of the World Health Organizations. There I met the Holy See's representative to the negotiations. After I sought him out, I indicated my concern that nothing in Catholic teaching was seriously addressing the health pandemic caused by tobacco. He dismissed me with an approach that left me with the distinct impression that the Vatican had other global issues more burning than tobacco control.

It would be wrong to say that nothing at all has been done within official Roman Catholicism. The most evident was a June, 2002 law approved by Pope John Paul II banning smoking in nearly all closed spaces inside the 108-acre Vatican city-state. The law entrusts the Vatican's police force with enforcement. Violators, including cardinals and archbishops, face a 30-euro fine. But, while going smoke-free is fine, having the leaders of the institutional church in the U.S. and in the Vatican address the morality of tobacco use as well as the unconscionable promotion and marketing of tobacco by the industry would be better.

What will it take for an official voice on the subject? In 1997, when I sent my tobacco survey to various religious entities, one bishop wrote: "The issue is complex and personal. The morality argument is not persuasive to everyone. Perhaps better and compelling research is needed demonstrating cause and effect relationships." In a similar vein another bishop explained that the silence arose because people "were still sifting the evidence."

When Philip Morris' own website acknowledges the cigarette smoking causes ill health continued calls for more "evidence" belies an unwillingness to act. Aware that another statement about the moral issues connected to tobacco promotion, marketing and use will fall on deaf ears. With the Bishops' moral credibility at an all-time low, a simple declaration of concern and some monies expended for literature on tobacco cessation programs would be appropriate. It would also be helpful if the U.S. Bishops would publicly ask for a serious study on the issue (addressing consumers and producers) with appropriate changes made in official church teaching on tobacco.

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