

The Holy See, Cairo and The Pundits

By William A. Donohue

The Cairo Conference on Population and Development will mostly be remembered for what the Holy See did: it held the line against the determined modernists from the U.S. and Western Europe. It's been some time since the Vatican asserted itself so boldly, surprising friend and foe alike. While it may be a bit presumptuous to say that the Vatican won, it certainly did not lose. It succeeded in denying the abortion-rights fanatics a clear victory and it succeeded in removing reference to "other unions" outside marriage from the final document. At the very least, the Vatican won the respect of its most vociferous critics, and in the game of world politics, that alone counts for a lot.

The pundits, of course, came at the Vatican from all sides. Four types of reactions were evident: stupidity, intellectual dishonesty, hypocrisy and bigotry.

Here's a sample of each.

As the name of the Cairo conference implies, the issue of development was supposed to be given equal weight to the issue of population. But in reality, neither the pundits who covered the conference, nor the participants who attended the proceedings, had much interest in anything but population matters. In some cases, it wasn't disinterest that accounted for the lack of discussion, it was pure stupidity. For example, consider the spokeswoman from Zero Population Growth (ZPG) whom I debated on National Public Radio.

After an exchange on abortion, I moved the subject to the question of economic development. When I completed my remarks, I asked the ZPG lady why she showed little interest in this

aspect of the Cairo conference. She quickly said that she was very much concerned about the issue of development and explained that that was why she wanted to comment further on the right of women to have an abortion. Stunned at first, I answered by saying that abortion rights and economic development were not synonymous. Ignoring this, she pressed her case for abortion rights once again. I finally said that a good debate on this subject was impossible as my adversary was simply too dumb to understand the meaning of the term "development. "

I ran into intellectual dishonesty on a FOX TV show, this time with a spokeswoman from NARAL, a national abortion-rights organization. I commented that the terms "fertility regulation" and "reproductive rights" were code for abortion-on-demand. The NARAL lady tried to deny this.

She also tried to deny the significance of other language in the document. It was originally stated that "the family is *the* basic unit in society," but it was changed to read "the family is *a* basic unit in society." I maintained that the change was made so as to place alternative lifestyles on the same platform with the family. When she denied this I threw it back in her court: if the change in the language from the family being *the* basic unit to *a* basic unit didn't mean what I said it did, then she should have no trouble accepting the original wording. I got no reply but that didn't stop me from accusing her, on the air, of intellectual dishonesty. In any event, the Vatican succeeded in forcing a change back to the original wording.

Hypocrisy was evident in much of the commentary on the Cairo conference. No one outdid William Safire of the *New York Times*. Normally a trenchant observer of domestic and international politics, Safire exposed a side of him in his column of September 5th that I had not seen before. He accused the Vatican of engaging in "unprecedented papal meddling in U.S. politics" for simply criticizing the Clinton

administration's positions at the conference.

Much to Safire's chagrin, the Holy See is an elected member state of the United Nations. As such, it has the right to applaud or criticize the policies of any other member state, including the U.S. But even if the Holy See did not belong to the U.N., it would be curious to learn from Safire why the Vatican should refrain from passing comment on world affairs. After all, all we ever hear these days (especially from the *New York Times*) is that the Vatican was "silent" during the Holocaust. Now the Vatican is being blamed for saying too much. Perhaps Pope John Paul II should consult with Safire and his newspaper on when to speak out and when to shut up; it would make for interesting reading.

What is most appalling about Safire's commentary is that it should come from a man known to be a libertarian First Amendment absolutist. In the late 1970s, Safire had no problem telling his fellow Jews in Skokie, Illinois just how wrong they were in not allowing Nazis to march in their town. Now the same guy who thinks Nazis should be treated like the Boy Scouts thinks the Vatican ought to muzzle its objections to abortion-on-demand.

Finally, the bigots were in full-force during the Cairo proceedings. Frances Kissling, the inveterate Catholic-baiter from Catholics for a Free Choice, made her rounds on the talk shows slamming the Church anytime she got a chance. She repeated her call to have the Holy See booted out of the U.N. though it is not certain that anyone paid much attention to her. Then there was Sister Maureen Fiedler and her little-known band called Catholics Speak Out. Profoundly alienated, Sister Fiedler chimes right in with the bigots, so much so that she sounds like the Queen of the Sour Grapes Brigade.

The anti-Catholic bigots in the Clinton administration got so exercised during the Cairo conference that Leon Panetta, the White House Chief of Staff, acknowledged that there was a

problem with Catholic-bashing and vowed to discipline anyone who continued to chide the Vatican. That was perhaps the brightest note to come out of the week-long conference.