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JIMMY AKIN

Intellectual dishonesty and the "Seamless Garment" argument

BY JIMMY AKIN 01/25/2015 Comments (75)

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"The image of the 'seamless garment' has been used by some theologians and Catholic politicians, in an intellectually dishonest manner."

That's a sentiment that many Catholics, particularly in the pro-life movement, have expressed.

What's significant about this expression of the sentiment is the person who uttered it: the pope's own doctrinal watchdog.

Here are 11 things to know and share . . .

1) What is the "seamless garment" argument?

It's the claim that Catholic teaching on life is like a seamless garment, so that if you accept one part of it, you need to accept it all.

This is sometimes referred to as having a "consistent ethic of life."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consistent_life_ethic



Why did Cardinal Muller accuse some theologians and Catholic politicians of "intellectual dishonesty"?

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About Jimmy Akin



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Jimmy was born in Texas, grew up nominally Protestant, but at age 20 experienced a profound conversion to Christ. Planning on becoming a Protestant pastor or seminary professor, he started an intensive study of the Bible. But the more he immersed himself in Scripture the more he found to support the Catholic faith. Eventually, he entered the Catholic Church. His conversion story, "A Triumph and a Tragedy," is published in *Surprised by Truth*. Besides being an author, Jimmy is the Senior Apologist at Catholic Answers, a contributing editor to *Catholic Answers Magazine*, and a weekly guest on "Catholic Answers Live."

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The image of the seamless garment is taken from the Gospel of John, where we read:

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts, one for each soldier; also his tunic.

But the tunic was without seam, woven from top to bottom; so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the scripture, "They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" [John 19:23-24].

3) How has the Church historically used this image?

It has been commonly used as a symbol of the Church's unity. You'll see that in various Magisterial documents. For example, in 2007, Benedict XVI stated:

An indispensable characteristic of the Church is unity, symbolized by Christ's seamless garment [General Audience, June 6, 2007].

4) How did this image get applied to the Church's teaching on life?

Apparently, the image was first applied this way in 1971 by Catholic pacifism activist Eileen Egan.

In 1983, this use was popularized by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

5) What kinds of "life issues" have been proposed as belonging to the seamless garment?

Numerous things. Among them are abortion, euthanasia, nuclear war, capital punishment, and even poverty.

6) Who is the pope's "doctrinal watchdog"?

This is a common way of referring to the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the department in Rome that is charged with protecting the Church's teaching.

This is the position that Benedict XVI held before his election to the papacy. Today it is held by Cardinal Gerhard Muller (pictured).

7) Where did Cardinal Muller address the seamless garment argument?

He did so in an address he gave at a workshop sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Life in 2013.

You can read the full text of his remarks here (pdf).

8) What did he say about it?

He began by giving an overview of the subject, saying:

We are all familiar with the image of the "seamless garment" which is used to illustrate how Catholic moral teaching is a consistent whole - uniting ethical, religious, and political threads in a unified moral vision.

Attributed to Cardinal Bernardin, the "seamless garment" image was used to great effect to root the Church's response to various moral issues - from nuclear proliferation to poverty - within the overarching teaching on the sanctity of human life, from natural conception to natural death.

9) What did he say when he accused some of using it in an intellectually dishonest manner?

He said:

Unfortunately, however, it is also true that the image of the "seamless garment" has been used by some theologians and Catholic politicians, in an intellectually dishonest

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simultaneously accompanied by opposition to the death penalty or promotion of economic development for the poor - issues which are also part of the fabric of Catholic moral teaching.



10) Did he say anything about why people use the argument this way?

Yes. He stated:

Often this abuse of the "seamless garment" theory stems from a natural tendency on the part of some in the Church to look for "common ground" with the surrounding culture; that is to say, to emphasize in their teaching and preaching those elements of Catholic doctrine that are acceptable to the non-Catholic ambient culture; for example, social justice, human rights, and other similar issues.

This is understandable and sometimes it is an appropriate pastoral strategy.

But what also must be taken into account is the difference which exists between those elements of Catholic teaching that may be attractive to the surrounding culture and those elements which are profoundly counter-cultural and which Catholics themselves need to hear proclaimed by their pastors.

11) What solutions did he propose?

He stressed that Church teaching must be presented as a whole, without turning a blind eye to particular aspects of it.

He particularly emphasized the need to proclaim the Church's teaching on human sexuality as found in Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*, saying:

The experience of the Church . . . demonstrates that where the Church has tried to accommodate her teaching to this secular understanding by deemphasizing the specific witness of her moral teaching, this has lead neither to a greater societal acceptance of the Church nor to a renewal in her own life.

Rather where the teaching of *Humanae vitae* has been down-played, or worse still ignored, we have witnessed a collapse of family life, an increase in extra-marital infidelity and a diminishment of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

He had much more to say on this and related subjects, so be sure to check out the full text of his remarks, linked above.

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