“Even an ignorant like me knows that there are abortions that have nothing of immoral”

June 28, 2020

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Santiago Agrelo, Archbishop Emeritus of Tangier. (Loan)

He left Galicia and returned to Galicia many years later, as someone who returns to his origins to, from there, better contemplate and analyze his spiritual life that begins in the post-war years, when his family decides to send him to a convent. “It is true, I did not decide to be a friar; My grandparents decided, with what I grew up. One day, my grandfather said, “This boy has to be locked up.” It is not that I was more mischievous than the other children, but it is that, in the 1950s, in a village in Galicia, it was not easy to carve out a future for oneself.So I think my grandfather sent me at eleven years old to the Franciscan seminary. So I went in and never thought about anything else… ”. So much so that **Santiago Agrelo Martinez** (Asados, Rianxo, A Coruña, June 20, 1942) he ascended the ecclesiastical hierarchy until, in 2007, as parish priest of the diocese of Astorga, the Pope Benedict XVI **He was appointed Archbishop Tangier.** It is possible that there, where he never imagined arriving, Monsignor Agrelo found all the meaning of his life, of his spirituality. A year ago, Pope Francis accepted the retirement he had presented two years earlier, when he turned 75, and he was assigned, again, to the Franciscan province of Santiago de Compostela.

QUESTION. The world is experiencing a pandemic that has brought humanity to its knees. Many believers, in the face of this wave of deaths, of suffering, have been able to ask themselves: where is God? I ask you, because the Lord’s Prayer says ‘Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’

Monsignor Santiago Agrelo. (Loan)

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REPLY. If we assume that God, in Creation, kept his intervention on Earth outside of earthly laws, we are inventing a world that does not exist, that has never existed. The world has its laws, its norms, its autonomy, and that does not remove anything from what belongs to God. When Jesus taught us the Lord’s Prayer, and we say ‘your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven’, he refers to the children of God, those who are already with him, in another dimension, and those who still We are here on Earth, and we can choose to do good or evil. And we ask him to do his will on earth, that is, to help us always choose good. That is what the Lord’s Prayer refers to, not to God’s dominion over nature, but to our life being in line with what our Father wants from us. When we ask ourselves those questions, a Christian always remembers that Jesus Christ was a victim of the evil of the earth, not of the evil of nature, but of human evil, of the human will to do evil. Facing the cross of Jesus, we do have to ask ourselves that question; Jesus also did it to himself when he exclaimed, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Jesus does not question the existence of God, but is unable to understand his own situation at that moment.

Q. The opposite may also exist, whoever thinks that these evils that plague humanity are not proof of the nonexistence of God, but that if they happen it is because it is a punishment from God.

R. Please, but who can think that nonsense … God does not intervene in the world in that way, God does not come here not to reward or to punish. The son of God became man to teach us to live our humanity, to teach us to accept our limits. That is the meaning of the Incarnation, that God Himself takes the trouble to tell us what our path is. In Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve is narrated in some chapters that are some of the most beautiful and significant in Holy Scripture, yet they are not given adequate attention. In Adam and Eve we have the figure of Humanity, of man and woman who try to get out of their condition, expropriate their limitations, to go up to the place that God occupies. Jesus Christ is the counterfigure of Adam and Eve; it is who, being God, renounces that divine power, to assume our limits. And he assumes the human condition, not on the throne of a king, not even in the chair of a president or a minister, but he descends to the condition of a slave and dies like a cursed man. These are the two paths that every man, every woman, must choose, that of climbing to try to occupy the place of God or that of descending to occupy the place revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, giving life to others. To summarize, what interests me about this pandemic is the victims. In fact, for the Church, and I mean the Christian communities scattered around the world, it will be a challenge because we will have to be with the victims of the greatest poverty that will come after the virus.

P. You speak emphatically that the pandemic has nothing to do with God, but not everyone thinks the same. For example, Monsignor Cañizares said a few days ago that “the devil is in the pandemic.” He said this because of the use of human embryos, originating from abortions, in search of a vaccine.

R. I have not heard Monsignor Cañizares’ words and I do not know the context. What I can guess is what would go through my head if I got the news that they are experimenting with a vaccine with cultures of cells from aborted fetuses and what I would not do is take a leap and pass the field of morality. I mean that there will be those who think that, when it comes to abortions, it is something immoral, when even an ignorant person like me knows that there are abortions that have nothing immoral. Therefore, going from the investigation of these cells to the immoral, is a leap that is not legitimate. As representatives of the Church’s teaching profession, we should always be very careful when saying certain things … This applies to everyone, naturally starting with myself. I don’t know what Monsignor Antonio said [Cañizares], or if his words have been

taken out of context, but I do think that we, if we want to make a moral judgment on certain things, it has to be with knowledge of the cause, and not through rumors or the first news that you arrives. It is a matter of prudence, and a fool tells you.

“If you are undergoing a vaccine with cells from aborted fetuses, what I will not do is say that it is immoral, when even an ignorant person like me knows that there are abortions that are immoral and have nothing”

Q. Abortion … Very few in the Church affirm that not all abortions are immoral.

A. Yes, yes, but everyone in the Church knows that there are abortions on which, in no way, can a negative moral judgment fall. Anyway, look, we are not here, I am not authorized to think of any woman who has aborted who did it in immoral conditions, who had no right to do it. I cannot think that, ever, because it is making a judgment that does not correspond to me. Theoretically, I can condemn the woman, or her environment, deliberately causing an abortion. But that is the theory, the pages of a book are not the pages of life, and therefore I cannot condemn it. Never.

P. Pope Francis already established a position, shortly after being elected. He said that the Church could not be all the time talking about abortions, gays and condoms, that there are other issues that deserve your attention. I believe that you, Mr. Archbishop, are in that line, but you go much further.

A. When we insist so much on a subject, we don’t get any benefit. Things are said once, and then action is taken. I am going to make it very clear to you, as I think it: to be constantly hammering away with the issue of abortion, which has possibly caused an increase in supporters of abortion. If instead, we had approached the woman who is in that situation, at the prospect of an abortion in her life, we would have already greatly reduced the number of abortions. Approaching the woman to understand her, to welcome her, to walk with her … Anyway, some people think that they have to be always hammering on that nail and the only thing they get is to do damage. We must always be found close to people and if it is sinners, much closer.

The Archbishop Emeritus of Tangier with a group of parishioners. (Loan)

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P. I mentioned before the devil and the pandemic. Allow me the simplicity: had not the Church already said that hell is not a place? Because again there are those who talk about hell …

R. Are you really telling me that? Let’s see, let’s see, I’m going to say it like this, even if someone scandalizes me: I don’t care about heaven and I don’t care about hell; I mean, I don’t care what is after death. I do not care. I leave that to God, I leave it to my Lord, I don’t have to worry about what comes after death, I have to worry about what is before death. And what is before death are men, women and children who in their lives have known nothing but suffering. I have known many of them up close that I have already died and I know millions from afar, who are there, even if nobody wants to see them, and who, by the thousands, are starving every day. I know the homeless up close, those who have no job … That world is the one I know closely and it is the one I have to worry about; God our Lord will take care of the other. This present that I live, God has given it to me so that I can work it, so that I can worry about its most unfortunate children. For

this he has given me eyes to see, hands to work and heart to feel. It is this world that worries me and makes me laugh to see that there are people who worry about hell and heaven. That, that they leave it to God our Lord … To worry about those things is to have no faith.

Q. What did you learn as Archbishop of Tangier?

R. The Lord has granted me a very great Grace throughout my life, and that is to have my eyes open where I am. When I went to Tangier I had no idea what that was, although I had been there a few times. I had to face languages that I did not know, a culture, the Islamic, that I also did not know and, finally, the world of immigration, that I was totally unaware of… I understand very well the people in Spain who see immigrants as strangers and almost like a hindrance; people who have no right to come to this world that we are in and that is our world. I understand them because it is the idea that I had when I was here and only when I had them in front did I understand that there were violated fundamental rights. And I understood that we who were preventing the exercise of those rights are us, who believe that we have the right to close our borders. You learn that in contact with reality. Another thing that came in handy to learn is to be a minority Church, something small in the middle of an immense Muslim world and, even so, it is a diocese full of vitality.

Q. Let’s dig into that, separately. The idea we have is that the Catholic Church in the Muslim world is subject to harassment, aggressiveness, and permanent hostility. Did he live it like this? In fact, there is Islamic terrorist fundamentalism …

A. Let’s see, fundamentalist groups do not target Christians, but the whole world, including non-fundamentalist Muslims. Fundamentalism, which exists in all ideologies, which also exists in Christianity, is one thing, and the coexistence of Muslims and Christians is another. Franciscans have been in Morocco since the time of San Francisco and we have always been in the minority and in holy peace. I want to say that both the authorities and the Moroccan people have always welcomed the Christian community and the same has happened, that I know of, with the Jewish community. The normal, the traditional, has always been solidarity, coexistence, familiarity.

Q. Well, it is true that there are fundamentalists everywhere, but it is not fair to equate them with Islamic terrorist fundamentalism.

A. There are many armed confrontations in the world that have nothing to do with the Muslim world. And when talking about a fundamentalism that kills, imagine the deaths caused by the fundamentalism of those who close ports and allow immigrants to sink into the sea. We can’t wash our hands at that. That is a political, ideological fundamentalism and, supposedly, linked to Christian beliefs. You will understand the grace that makes me see someone with the rosary in his hand saying here no god enters.

Q. You may have heard that those who act in this way often think that the wave of immigration is a ‘Trojan horse’, an invasion that endangers Europe itself, its traditions and its culture.

R. I cannot admit, under any circumstances, that the poor person who is looking for a future is considered a kind of soldier, hidden on a horse, to invade Europe. That is an image that deforms the hunger and suffering of immigrants and destroys their lives. He condemns thousands and thousands of people to death. Yes, of course I heard it; I have heard high representatives of the Catholic Church saying that immigrants were the “Trojan horse” of Islam to Islamize Europe … The hungry have the right to bread where there is and we have bread, with which they will come here. Sanse finished. What do I care if the hungry is an Islamist, a Protestant or an Anglican. I do not care. There is a verse in one of the Letters of Saint Paul that should be engraved in the mind, “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, free or slave, male or female, we are all one in Christ Jesus.” Poverty, need, is what counts, not labels. And if what concerns you are the birth rates of non-Christian immigrants, well what do you want me to say, you cannot think of shielding a Christian

and infertile Europe. As I was about to say to a cardinal, ‘dedicate yourselves to having children!’ Thank goodness I only thought about it, ha ha ha, that I did not tell him, ha ha ha …

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P. Yes, yes, thank goodness. In any case, what seems evident is that hunger in Africa cannot be solved by letting everyone enter Europe, because it is impossible. It is like thinking that Europe is to blame for hunger in Africa.

A. What is evident is that Europe has a lot to do with hunger in Africa. If you look at the map of Africa a century ago, you will only find European flags. Decolonization left a map of African flags, but there are no African economies, but economies dependent on the same lords and natural resources always exploited by the same exploiters. Europeans, North Americans, Canadians, Chinese, Russians, Indians … Africa continues to be the continent from which everyone will draw resources and no one will allow the African people to live on their resources. We dispossess them, impoverish them and then we try to make them stay there to enjoy their poverty and not come to bother us in our rich world, thanks to the riches that were taken from Africa.

“We dispossess the African people, impoverish them and then we try to make them stay there to enjoy their poverty and not come to bother us in our rich world”

P. Okay, but that does not answer what I was saying, that it is not possible to open borders, without more, and try to solve the hunger of Africa by bringing everyone to Europe.

R. How many sub-Saharan immigrants have knocked on the doors of Europe? Look at the numbers and you will see that it is possible … They all fit in Galicia, come on. How many abandoned towns are there in Castillas? Tell me how the reality of ‘Spain emptied’ is married with that reasoning that immigrants do not fit in Europe. Of course they fit, what happens is that we do not want them, which is something very different.

P. Pedro Sánchez’s government promised to remove the concertinas from the border, but what is ignored in Spain is that it did so after making sure that Morocco was going to build a second concertina wire, even more aggressive, in its own territory. Did that seem like hypocrisy?

R. I will not tire of reporting it, even if it is now far away. The decision of the Spanish Government to withdraw the concertinas, which I do not even know if it has already been fully carried out, has not been taken until Morocco had its fence raised with blades on the other side of the border. It is a game of empty words, nothing more. There is no more respect for the rights of these people to migrate or the right to their own physical integrity. Those rights are continuously violated. And not only for the blades, for the ditches, for the fences… Also for the action of the forces of order because, systematically, every time a group of immigrants tries to cross the border, they are accused of violence when it is not more that they have to exercise to try to jump a wall that has been raised in front of them. And they are accused of being violent! This deeply disgusts me, because it is we, from birth to death, who exercise tremendous violence against these boys. We force them to suffer every day of their lives and then they are condemned. It is pure hypocrisy,

now there are higher fences, deeper pits, inverted blades and combs, millions and millions of euros invested in building walls for the poor. Look, from what we were talking about before, that will indeed have to be answered before God after death. And I already tell you that there will be many who will be in trouble because of what they do here with the poor.

“Spain’s decision to withdraw the concertinas was not taken until Morocco raised its fence with blades across the border”

P. That is the vision that, as I was saying before, has radically changed him after his time in the Archbishopric of Tangier ...

A. It is as simple as calling things by their names. Take a look, for example, at the way we talk about borders: there are no boys who are hungry, there are no women subjected to rape, day after day, no children who do not know what a family home is … At the borders There are illegal, irregular, illegal papers … They are spoken of as ghosts, who do not suffer. All this is an enormous hypocrisy to which the governments and also the media are a part, which rarely venture to give rigorous and reliable information on the borders. One of the problems of this society is that it does not know what is on the borders, or on the roads of immigrants. If they knew, if they could see it, they would not tolerate it. This society that does not tolerate the mistreatment of a dog, how is it that it tolerates the killing of thousands of immigrants. Fifteen days ago, fifty people drowned off the coast of Tunisia, most of them women … This is unacceptable bleeding, not just hypocrisy, which is, as someone said, the homage that lies pay to the truth. It’s no more, **it is a crime against humanity.**