

Opinions

The oxymoronic beatification: Saints, sinners, and the church's selective morality

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King Baudouin of Belgium

”Saint Hitler? Why Not!” Picture this: The Vatican announces plans to beatify Adolf Hitler, commending him for his admiration of Christianity and his claim to emulate the Church’s historical treatment of Jews. Outlandish, you say?

Yet, King Baudouin of Belgium—a man who praised King Leopold II, architect of one of history’s bloodiest genocides—may soon be canonised for opposing abortion. On September 29, 2024 Pope Francis announced he will open the process for the beatification

of King Baudouin.

The Church’s selective morality reveals an alarming contradiction: holiness seems to hinge on selective memory rather than consistent principles.

Baudouin’s sanctification showcases a broader hypocrisy within the Catholic Church, which remains quick to denounce re-productive ethics while historically ignoring, and at times endorsing, systemic violence.

Let’s dissect this paradox, where anti-abortion advocacy trumps complicity in genocide.

King Baudouin: Pro-life, pro-Genocide?

King Baudouin is hailed as a model Catholic for his refusal to sign Belgium’s 1990 law legalising abortion, stating, “I would rather abdicate than violate my conscience.”

However, this devoutness fades when viewed alongside his veneration of King

Leopold II, his granduncle. Leopold ruled the Congo Free State as his personal fiefdom, orchestrating a genocide that claimed up to 10 million lives.

Baudouin lauded Leopold's colonial exploits, describing them as "a civilising mission." This whitewashing is grotesque, given Leopold's regime's reliance on forced labour, mutilation, and systemic terror.

Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* documents these horrors: Rubber quotas enforced through murder and mutilation. Villages razed, with women and children taken hostage. Severed hands of children presented as proof of "efficiency."

For Baudouin, Leopold's brutality was a footnote to his "civilising" achievements. Worse, Baudouin's admiration for Leopold extended to his complicity in Rwanda's racial policies under PARMEHUTU, the party that spearheaded anti-Tutsi pogroms in the 1960s.

Baudouin maintained a close friendship with Gregoire Kayibanda, Rwanda's first president and founder of PARMEHUTU. Kayibanda's policies institutionalised ethnic hatred, framing Tutsis as foreign oppressors. His anti-Tutsi ideology escalated, culminating in the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi.

Baudouin's silence on these atrocities, despite his influence in Rwanda, speaks volumes. Can one truly be called pro-life while aligning with genocidal regimes?

Baudouin's reverence for Leopold II accentuates the Church's complicity in colonial violence. Leopold's Congo Free State epitomized exploitation and brutality.

Entire communities were destroyed to extract rubber, leading to millions of deaths.

Yet Baudouin called Leopold's actions a "gift to civilisation."

Hochschild writes: "Leopold never set foot in the Congo, yet his agents turned it into a massive labor camp. Millions died from overwork, starvation, or outright murder."

Mark Twain, an outspoken critic, described Leopold as "a king with ten million murders on his soul."

Despite these atrocities, the Church never excommunicated Leopold or condemned his actions. Instead, the Vatican celebrated Belgium's colonial efforts as part of its missionary work.

Argentina: A case study in whitening

Pope Francis's Argentine roots provide a chilling parallel. Argentina, once home to vibrant Black and Indigenous populations, systematically erased these communities in its pursuit of racial purity.

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Argentina's seventh president, epitomized this ideology. Sarmiento openly praised the United States for its treatment of Black and Indigenous peoples, stating:

"The United States grows and progresses. There, they kill Indians, they burn Blacks, and that's how it gets richer, stronger."

Sarmiento's policies targeted Afro-Argentines through forced conscription, denial of healthcare, and displacement. Epidemics like cholera disproportionately affected Black communities, who were left to

die in overcrowded slums.

In the early 19th century, Black Argentines made up approximately 30% of the population in cities like Buenos Aires. By the late 19th century, they accounted for less than 2%. Recent statistical data, blacks are less than 1%.

This dramatic decline was orchestrated through: Forced conscription during wars, where Black soldiers were sent to the frontlines to die disproportionately. Epidemics like yellow fever, where Black neighborhoods were deliberately neglected. Systematic exclusion from census counts to erase their presence.

The Conquest of the Desert (1879–1885), led by General Julio Argentino Roca, aimed to “civilize” Patagonia by exterminating Indigenous peoples.

Tens of thousands were killed, and survivors were enslaved. Roca remains a national hero, with statues in his honor adorning Argentine cities.

The Catholic Church blessed these campaigns, framing them as divine missions to spread Christianity. This echoes the Church’s support for Belgian colonialism and its silence during the Holocaust.

The church’s historical ambivalence

Peter de Rosa’s *Vicars of Christ: The Dark Side of the Papacy* sheds light on the Church’s moral double standards. De Rosa critiques the Church’s historical complicity in violence,

highlighting an infamous 1936 meeting between Hitler and Catholic Bishop Wilhelm Berning of Osnabrück:

”There is no fundamental difference between National Socialism and the Catholic Church,” Hitler told Berning. ”Had not the Church looked on Jews as parasites and shut them in ghettos? I am only doing what the Church has done for fifteen hundred years, only more effectively.”

Hitler’s claim reveals how the Church’s selective morality emboldened genocidaires. As De Rosa notes, “The Church is often more obsessed with sexual morality than saving lives.”

This obsession is evident in papal encyclicals like *Humanae Vitae* (1968) under Pope Paul VI; and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) under Pope John Paul II:

“Every action which, either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation is intrinsically evil.” (*Humanae Vitae*)

On protecting the unborn child: “The deliberate decision to deprive an innocent human being of life is always morally evil and can never be licit.” (*Evangelium Vitae*)

De Rosa observes that the ideals expressed in *Humanae Vitae* are nearly impossible to practice universally, making many Catholics guilty of moral failure in the eyes of the Church. “If Catholics who don’t practice these teachings are considered Protestants, then the Church might as well accept that its congregation is largely Protestant.”

While these encyclicals emphasize the sanctity of life, they ignore systemic atrocities like genocide. This discriminatory focus weakens the Church’s moral authority.

The Vatican's curious hierarchy of sins

The Church's selective morality undermines its credibility. While encyclicals like *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) address social justice, they remain silent on colonial atrocities.

Peter de Rosa critiques this ambivalence, stating: "The Church is often more concerned with what happens in bedrooms than in battlefields. It condemns contraception but blesses wars. It preaches love but tolerates hate."

This hypocrisy is evident in Baudouin's beatification. If his pro-life stance is grounds for sainthood, should we also canonize Leopold II or Sarmiento for their "civilizing missions"?

Back to Rwanda. In 2023, Pope Francis took decisive action against Fr. Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, a Catholic priest whose transgression could not go unpunished. His crime? He fathered a child.

The punishment was swift and unforgiving: stripped of his clerical state, Munyeshyaka was barred from performing any sacred duties, from distributing communion to so much as standing in places where his former status might be recognized.

The Vatican's message was clear: breaking vows of celibacy is intolerable, an act so egregious it warrants what is essentially excommunication.

But genocide? Oh, that's another story. Fr. Munyeshyaka's story has another, darker layer. In 2006, he was convicted in absentia for genocide. Yet the Vatican's reaction to

this monumental crime? Deafening silence.

It seems the Holy See reserves its outrage for matters of the flesh rather than matters of mass murder. While celibacy breaches invite swift and unequivocal condemnation, genocide convictions seem to prompt nothing more than a shrug.

Take, for instance, Fr. Denis Sekamana and Fr. Emmanuel Rukundo, both Catholic priests convicted of genocide. After serving their sentences, they were seamlessly reintegrated into clerical work, robes and all.

Fr. Athanase Seromba, who commanded the bulldozing of his own church—burying alive over 1,500 Tutsi refugees—was sentenced to life in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR).

Yet, from his cell, Seromba continues to wear his liturgical vestments and perform priestly duties. Perhaps, in the Vatican's eyes, orchestrating mass murder is simply an unconventional way of spreading the word of God.

This peculiar moral arithmetic is not new. Bishops André Perraudin and Focas Nikwigize, ardent supporters of genocidal plans, faced no rebuke from the Church.

Meanwhile, Bishops Kizito Bahujimihigo and Anastase Mutabazi were swiftly removed from their diocesan leadership positions — not for endorsing genocide, but for financial mismanagement.

Clearly, to the Vatican, balancing the books is a more sacred duty than protecting human lives.

The Church's hierarchy of sins reflects an almost comical prioritization. Siring a child? Unforgivable. Mismanaging finances? Intol-

erable. Genocide? Let's not rush to judgment. After all, the Vatican has an impressive history of turning a blind eye to atrocities.

During the Genocide Against the Tutsi in 1994, Catholic priests and bishops played active roles in the extermination of their parishioners. The most infamous of them, like Fr. Seromba turned places of worship into death traps.

Yet the Church has shown no urgency in addressing these crimes. Instead, priests convicted of genocide have been allowed to resume their roles, as though preaching forgiveness and orchestrating mass murder are two sides of the same coin.

Meanwhile, the Church's fixation on sexual morality remains unshaken. Priests who falter in their vows of celibacy are treated with the kind of disdain one might reserve for heretics in the Middle Ages.

Their "sins of the flesh" are apparently more scandalous than their complicity in genocide, more damaging than their betrayal of an entire congregation.

Perhaps it's time for the Vatican to codify its priorities. A new catechism, perhaps, that reflects its unspoken doctrine:

Article I: Thou shalt not father children. This is the gravest of sins, for it undermines the sacred vow of celibacy and tarnishes the Church's image. Punishment will be swift and eternal.

Article II: Thou shalt not mismanage Church funds. Financial indiscretion is a close second in the hierarchy of sins. After all, how can the Church maintain its vast wealth if its clergy are careless with money?

Article III: Thou shalt not commit genocide (but if thou dost, worry not too much). Genocide is unfortunate, but not unforgivable. A few years in prison, and you'll be back in your vestments in no time, ready to serve communion to the faithful.

Church's hollow holiness

King Baudouin's beatification reveals the Church's troubling priorities. Sanctity, it seems, is not about moral consistency but institutional convenience.

Baudouin's selective morality, which condemned abortion while glorifying colonial and racial violence, reflects a broader failure of the Church to address systemic injustice.

Until the Vatican confronts its complicity in genocide, its proclamations of sanctity will ring hollow. Baudouin's canonization raises a provocative question: If he can be a saint, why not Hitler, Leopold II, or Sarmiento? They, too, claimed to act for the greater good, however twisted their logic.

Perhaps Baudouin should be remembered not as a saint, but as a cautionary tale—a symbol of the Church's selective morality and the dangers of hollow sanctity.

The Vatican's response to genocide remains one of its most glaring moral failures. Its silence on the complicity of its clergy in the Genocide Against the Tutsi is a stain that no amount of piety can erase.

The Church, which preaches the sanctity of life, has repeatedly shown that its commitment to human dignity is discriminating at best.

In the end, the Vatican's actions send a clear message: siring a child is a greater betrayal of the Church than aiding and abetting genocide.

If this is the moral compass of the Catholic Church, one can only hope it's not pointing toward heaven.