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The Vatican's Driving Commandments: A Lapsed Catholic's Thoughts

What About the Separation of Church and Driving?

By **Christine Tetreault**

This really could be a godsend for me. The latest news released from Vatican City, Rome, may have come down just in time to help me reinforce the importance of positive, courteous, lifesaving driving skills with my 16-year-old son. It seems that powers far greater than the local or state police and registry of motor vehicle divisions are taking renewed interest in our driving thoughts and deeds.

The Vatican, through its Holy See Press Office and the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, recently issued the formal "Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Road." The road users section of the four-part document ask us to consider charity, abstinence, prayer, and other good deeds while we also continue to follow common driver safety rules, like slowing down at yellow lights and yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks.

Participating in the Vatican press conference were Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino and Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, president and secretary of the pontifical council. The document - published in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian - is divided into four sections: the pastoral care of road users, pastoral ministry for the liberation of street women, the pastoral care of street children, and the pastoral care of the homeless. (Visit the official Vatican web, as referenced in supporting Resources, to see for yourself that road users have the longest section, considered most in need of saving advice, perhaps?)

According to Cardinal Martino and the Vatican web site, inspiration for the document arose during the First European Meeting of National Directors of the Pastoral Care of the Road, held in 2003. "Its aim," according to the Cardinal, "is to guide and coordinate all the ecclesial bodies in the world of the pastoral care of the road, and to encourage and stimulate Episcopal (small "E" on the Vatican web site...) conferences of countries in which this form of pastoral care does not exist, to organize it." Martino went on to refer to the "evangelization of the road" with a plug for expanding the network of roadside traveling ministries.

Not to sound like a non-believer, but I have serious doubts as to how much prayer before buckling up will do to save me from the oncoming drunk driver barreling through the red light in his mega SUV, or whether voices from Rome will really change my level of attention to well-known rules of the road or my moral compass on the stupidity and danger of driving under the influence or without a seat belt.

Am in the minority in wondering if this proclamation could possibly be for real and whether the Vatican and advisors have bothered to flip their calendar pages even once in the past century? Is driving as "a big part of contemporary life" some hot news revelation within the Vatican walls that somehow escalates drivers to the top of the list of those suddenly in need of 'pastoral' oversight? Will our automobiles, now branded as dreaded vehicles open for potential 'occasions of sin' soon be invited to formal automotive baptismal rites of cleansing? Will moving violations be expanded to require penance for "impoliteness, rude gestures, cursing, blasphemy"?

I would much rather Rome keep its energies tuned into the highway to heaven and on remedial care of its own brethren and houses of worship rather than waste time stretching holy arms across our noisy, paved, and far less than spiritual moving highways. As I interpret the web report, it seems that the Cardinal is convinced that we common motorists have immediate pastoral road needs, like the many on-the-go itinerant people in the Bible. The Cardinal was kind enough to explain that he sees the Vatican as responsible for the guiding care of all "itinerant" people, be we gypsies, refugees, taxi drivers, or wandering homeless in search of shelter. I get the concern for the wayward homeless and needy. I do not get the link to the motorized driving masses.

Or maybe that's the point? To use the voice of the church to somehow break through our cross-country speed-racing haze just long enough to remind us that even isolated in our fancy, manufactured, waterproof, rolling power machines we are all still connected and vulnerable. Perhaps.

I do not disagree with the Cardinal on the value and moral goodness of saving the lives of even just a few of the "1.2 million people" killed on the road each year. That is, as Martino said, a sad reality, but do our driving "transgressions and negligence", committed by "show offs" behind the wheel, intent on 'dominating others' really belong on the top-10 missions list for a church in need of tending its own unruly house?

In praise of the worthiness of driving, the document does point out the goodness to come from driving - quality time together visiting distant family and friends, transport of the sick to medical appointments. Still, the positives are completely overwhelmed by

Takeaways

- The Vatican reveals that driving has become "a big part of contemporary life"
- Could cleansing automotive baptismal rites be far behind?
- The Vatican sees itself as responsible for the guiding care of all "itinerant" people

the warnings on the evils of careless driving and drivers.

Never mind the old adage, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. No matter where you live or find yourself as a good traveler on this earth, the next time you buckle your seat belt and prepare to back out of your driveway, offer a prayer to your virtual driving angel for directions to the nearest charity-focused gas station with the best Christian prices. When the cop pulls you over for running the stop sign, tell him the truth - that you were trying to untangle your Rosary beads from your steering wheel. Tell him the Cardinal made you do it.

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