

Pope's remarks in book open new chapter in condom debate

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- In a new book, Pope Benedict XVI said the use of condoms may be a sign of moral responsibility in some specific situations when the intention is to reduce the risk of AIDS.

The pope addressed the issue in the book-length interview, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times," which was to be released Nov. 23. The Vatican newspaper published excerpts from the book Nov. 20, including the comments on condoms.

In the book, the pope repeated what he said during a trip to Africa last year, that "we cannot solve the problem (of AIDS) by distributing condoms." Focusing exclusively on condoms damages human sexuality, making it "banal" and turning it into a kind of "drug," he said.

But the pope went on to say that in particular cases -- he mentioned prostitutes -- condom use may be justified as a first step toward taking moral responsibility for one's actions.

Here is the key passage as translated in the English edition of the book. The pope was asked whether it was "madness to forbid a high-risk population to use condoms."

"There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward discovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality," the pope said.

Peter Seewald, the German journalist who conducted the interview, then asked: "Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?"

The pope answered: "She of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality."

The Italian translation -- the only one officially released to date by the Vatican -- has a slightly different wording: it uses the feminine "prostitute", not male prostitute, and says this is an example of where condom use can be "justified."

It was the first time Pope Benedict -- or any pope -- has said publicly that condom use may be acceptable in some cases.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said Nov.

21 that the pope was not "reforming or changing" the church's teaching on sexual responsibility, but rather considering an "exceptional situation" in which sexual activity places a person's life at risk. While the pope was not morally justifying disordered sexual activity, he was saying that use of a condom to reduce the risk of transmitting the disease may be an act of moral responsibility, Father Lombardi said.

The spokesman said it would be an exaggeration to call the pope's comments "revolutionary," but he said they offered a courageous and important contribution to a long-debated question.

The pope's remarks underscored a distinction made previously by other church experts: that the church's teaching against condoms as a form of birth control is different from its position on condom use in disease prevention. The comments seemed destined to open a new chapter in the church's internal debate on that issue.

For years, in fact, Vatican officials and theologians have studied the morality of condom use to reduce the risk of AIDS. The Vatican has never proclaimed a "ban" on condom use in AIDS prevention; on the contrary, some Vatican theologians and officials have argued that for married couples in which one partner is HIV-infected, use of condoms could be a moral responsibility.

More generally, however, they have argued that promotion of condoms as the only or best answer to AIDS carries grave risks, mainly by promoting the idea that condoms guarantee "safe sex." In that sense, the pope said on his flight to Cameroon in 2009 that rather than solve the issue of HIV/AIDS, condoms "increase the problem." He encouraged campaigns to promote responsible sexuality instead.

When that episode was raised by Seewald in the book, the pope seemed to bristle.

"The media coverage completely ignored the rest of the trip to Africa on account of a single statement," he said. He said he felt "provoked" by the question, because the church does so much to care for AIDS patients.

"I had the chance to visit one of these wards and to speak with the patients. That was the real answer: The church does more than anyone else because she does not speak from the tribunal of the newspapers, but helps her brothers and sisters where they are actually suffering," he said.

In the book, the pope criticized the "fixation" on condoms in AIDS prevention, but without categorically ruling out their use.

"As a matter of fact, you know, people can get condoms when they want them anyway. But this just goes to show that condoms alone do not resolve the question itself. More needs to happen," he said.

"Meanwhile, the secular realm itself has developed the so-called ABC

Theory: Abstinence-Be Faithful-Condoms, where the condom is understood only as a last resort, when the other two points fail to work," he said.

The "ABC" campaign has received coverage in Vatican media in recent years. After his 2009 trip to Africa, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, published an interview with an Italian medical missionary, Brother Daniele Giusti, who said the ABC method has worked well in Uganda. He evaluated condom effectiveness in these terms: "The condom has worked in concentrated epidemics and among particular groups: prostitutes, homosexuals and drug addicts. Not so in other cases."

It's worth noting that in a different section of the new book, the pope defended the 1968 encyclical "Humanae Vitae," which taught that, in the context of married love, contraception techniques, including condoms, are immoral because they close off the possibility of the transmission of life.

"The basic lines of 'Humanae Vitae' are still correct. Finding ways to enable people to live the teaching, on the other hand, is a further question," the pope said. He indicated that pastors should show some tolerance for Catholics who have difficulty with the teaching on contraception.

"We should not take the failure to live up to this high moral standard as an authoritative objection to the truth. We should try to do as much good as we can and to support and put up with each other" and create conditions for better understanding of the teaching, he said.

The pope noted that the church accepts natural regulation of conception. He said that method presupposes that couples take time for each other, and is far different from taking a pill "so that I can jump into bed with a random acquaintance."

Theologians who advise the Vatican have underlined that it makes little sense to apply the church's teaching against contraception to sexual acts outside of marriage, since those acts are already considered immoral.

In a 2006 interview with [Catholic News Service](#), Msgr. Angel Rodriguez Luno, a moral theologian at Rome's Holy Cross University and a consultant to the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, said that "if unmarried persons do not abstain from sexual relations, or if spouses are not mutually faithful, these are sexual acts which are immoral in themselves, whether or not a condom is used."

In that context, he said, the condom is not the issue for the church.

"As for immoral acts, the church says only that one should abstain from them. The church does not have a doctrine on the various ways to carry out immoral acts," said Msgr. Rodriguez. Some theological experts have said that the life-and-death consequences of AIDS may make condom use a "lesser evil" that can be tolerated, even in

particular marital situations. On the other hand, some Vatican officials have argued that widespread distribution and use of condoms may encourage promiscuous sexual activity, which itself is a factor in the spread of AIDS.

In 2006, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, head of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, announced that his council had handed in a 200-page study on condoms in AIDS prevention, for further development by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation.

That raised the possibility of a Vatican pronouncement on the subject. But sources told **Catholic News Service** last year that any action on the report has been put on hold, in part because there was not unanimity of opinion, and in part because of fear that the nuances involved would only invite confusion in the media and among Catholics.

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