



Pope Benedict on condoms in *Light of the World*

What does the Holy Father really say about condoms in the new book?

By Dr. Janet E. Smith

This week, [Light of the World](#), a book-length interview given by Pope Benedict XVI to journalist Peter Seewald, will be released worldwide. Several of the Holy Father's statements have already started making news, particularly his comments regarding condom usage in the prevention of the spread of HIV.

To the charge that “It is madness to forbid a high-risk population to use condoms,” in the context of an extended answer on the help the Church is giving AIDs victims and the need to fight the banalization of sexuality, Pope Benedict replied:

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 recovering 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.

Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?

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 in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.

What is Pope Benedict saying?

We must note that the example that Pope Benedict gives for the use of a condom is a male prostitute; thus, it is reasonable to assume that he is referring to a male prostitute engaged in homosexual acts. The Holy Father is simply observing that for some homosexual prostitutes the use of a condom may indicate an awakening of a moral sense; an awakening that sexual pleasure is not the highest value, but that we must take care that we harm no one with our choices. He is not speaking to the morality of the use of a condom, but to something that may be true about the psychological state of those who use them. If such individuals are using condoms to avoid harming another, they may eventually realize that sexual acts between members of the same sex are inherently harmful since they are not in accord with human nature. The Holy Father does not in any way think the use of condoms is a part of the solution to reducing the risk of AIDs. As he explicitly states, the true solution involves “humanizing sexuality.”

Anyone having sex that threatens to transmit HIV needs to grow in moral discernment. This is why Benedict focused on a “first step” in moral growth. The Church is always going to be focused on moving people away from immoral acts towards love of Jesus, virtue, and holiness.



We can say that the Holy Father clearly did not want to make a point about condoms, but wants to talk about growth in a moral sense, which should be a growth towards Jesus.

So is the Holy Father saying it is morally good for male prostitutes to use condoms? The Holy Father is not articulating a teaching of the Church about whether or not the use of a condom reduces the amount of evil in a homosexual sexual act that threatens to transmit HIV. The Church has no formal teaching about how to reduce the evil of intrinsically immoral action. We must note that what is intrinsically wrong in a homosexual sexual act in which a condom is used is not the moral wrong of contraception but the homosexual act itself. In the case of homosexual sexual activity, a condom does not act as a contraceptive; it is not possible for homosexuals to contracept since their sexual activity has no procreative power that can be thwarted. But the Holy Father is not making a point about whether the use of a condom is contraceptive or even whether it reduces the evil of a homosexual sexual act; again, he is speaking about the psychological state of some who might use condoms. The intention behind the use of the condom (the desire not to harm another) may indicate some growth in a sense of moral responsibility.

In *Familiaris Consortio* (*On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*), John Paul II spoke of the need for conversion, which often proceeds by gradual steps:

To the injustice originating from sin ... we must all set ourselves in opposition through a conversion of mind and heart, following Christ Crucified by denying our own selfishness: such a conversion cannot fail to have a beneficial and renewing influence even on the structures of society.

What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which, while requiring an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness, is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man. (9)

Christ himself, of course, called for a turning away from sin. That is what the Holy Father is advocating here; not a turn towards condoms. Conversion, not condoms!

Would it be proper to conclude that the Holy Father would support the distribution of condoms to male prostitutes? Nothing he says here indicates that he would. Public programs of distribution of condoms run the risk of conveying approval for homosexual sexual acts. The task of the Church is to call individuals to conversion and to moral behavior; it is to help them understand the meaning and purpose of sexuality and to help them come to know Christ, who will provide the healing and graces that enable us to live in accord with the meaning and purpose of sexuality.

Is Pope Benedict indicating that heterosexuals who have HIV could reduce the wrongness of their acts by using condoms? No. In his second answer he says that the Church does not find condoms to be a "real or moral solution." That means the Church does not find condoms either to be moral or an effective way of fighting the transmission of HIV. As the Holy Father indicates



in his fuller answer, the most effective portion of programs designed to reduce the transmission of HIV are calls to abstinence and fidelity.

The Holy Father, again, is saying that the intention to reduce the transmission of any infection is a “first step” in a movement towards a more human way of living sexuality. That more human way would be to do nothing that threatens to harm one’s sexual partner, who should be one’s beloved spouse. For an individual with HIV to have sexual intercourse with or without a condom is to risk transmitting a lethal disease.

An analogy: If someone was going to rob a bank and was determined to use a gun, it would be better for that person to use a gun that had no bullets in it. It would reduce the likelihood of fatal injuries. But it is not the task of the Church to instruct potential bank robbers how to rob banks more safely and certainly not the task of the Church to support programs of providing potential bank robbers with guns that could not use bullets. Nonetheless, the intent of a bank robber to rob a bank in a way that is safer for the employees and customers of the bank may indicate an element of moral responsibility that could be a step towards eventual understanding of the immorality of bank robbing.

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Resources:

Edward C. Green, [“The Pope May Be Right”](#) *Washington Post* (Sunday, March 29, 2009);

Edward C. Green and Allison Herling Ruark, [“AIDS and the Churches: Getting the Story Right”](#) *First Things* (April, 2008);

Edward C. Green, *Rethinking AIDS Prevention: Learning from Successes in Developing Countries* (Praeger: 2003);

Matthew Hanley and Jokin de Irala, *Affirming Love, Avoiding AIDS: What Africa Can Teach The West* (National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2009);

Susan E. Wills, “Condoms and AIDS: Is the Pope Right or Just “Horribly Ignorant?”” *The Linacre Quarterly*, 77:10 (Feb 2010) 17-29;

Edward C. Green, *AIDS, Behavior, and Culture: Understanding Evidence-Based Prevention* (Left Coast Press: 2010) forthcoming