

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 18, 2009 at 12:19pm

Pope's condom message resonates with many

by John L. Allen Jr.



Benedict talks to journalists during his flight from Rome to Africa March 17. (CNS/ Reuters)

Yaoundè, Cameroon

Pope Benedict XVI's claim yesterday that condoms actually aggravate the problem of AIDS may seem an explosive claim internationally, but it's barely made a ripple here -- in part, because it simply repeats an argument made so often by Africa's Catholic bishops that it long ago lost any shock value.

In a nutshell, the bishops' position -- expressed both by individual prelates and by whole conferences -- is that wide availability of condoms encourages a sense of invulnerability among Africans, especially the young, that leads to riskier sexual behavior and increases the possibility of infection.

While the bishops may be nearly unanimous in that judgment, other Africans who spoke to NCR today didn't seem quite so sure.

(One point virtually everyone here concedes is that condoms are easy to come by. In Yaoundè, a condom can be purchased from street vendors for 100 Central African Francs, roughly twenty cents. Today, it was actually easier to find condoms than water, as Yaoundè's public water system broke down for several

hours.)

While the claim that condoms promote promiscuity and thus increase the risk of disease may fly in the face of most sentiment among anti-AIDS activists, African bishops insist that it reflects their real-world experience.

‘Condoms tend to give a sense of freedom to be sexually reckless, and obviously that is a major cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS,’ said Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, who is in Cameroon for the papal visit.

‘The Catholic church is not the only one saying this,’ Onaiyekan said. ‘NGOs who want to promote condoms in my country run into resistance from many other organizations and movements, including the Muslim community as a whole.’

Bishop George Nkuo of the Kumbo diocese in Cameroon made a similar argument.

‘I live in an area hit hard by the disease,’ Nkuo said. ‘I have huge amounts of testimony that the display and the spread of condoms has only promoted promiscuity. People believe that using them makes everything safe.’

Onaiyekan also argued that the condoms that are actually distributed in Africa, especially rural areas, are often unreliable.

‘A condom in New York is not the same thing as a condom twenty kilometers inside the bush,’ he said. ‘Some of them sat in a container in a port, under the sun, for maybe two or three months. By the time they bring them out on bicycles, passing them out in the bush, many are no good, but what people hear is: ‘Put this on, and you’re safe.’’

In contrast, prelates such as Onaiyekan and Nkuo argue, promoting more responsible sexual behavior is the most effective anti-AIDS strategy.

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‘The whole idea that fidelity and abstinence doesn’t work is not based on concrete evidence,’ Onaiyekan said. ‘I thought scientific people were supposed to look at the evidence. If you do that, you find that young people can actually change their mentality.’

African prelates often point to the experience of nations such as Uganda, where abstinence has been a cornerstone of anti-AIDS efforts. Among other things, they cite a Harvard study last year concluding that in African nations where the infection rate has dropped, ‘reduction in the number of sexual partners was probably the single most important behavioral change’ responsible for the drop-off.

Roughly 22 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are infected with HIV, according to the United Nations. In 2007, three-quarters of all AIDS deaths worldwide were in Africa, as well as two-thirds of all people living with HIV.

A decidedly unscientific survey in the streets of Cameroon’s capital city Wednesday afternoon suggests that among ordinary Africans, the anti-condoms argument is playing to mixed reviews.

‘It’s not true that condoms make someone more likely to have sex,’ said Donald Mepep, a 20-year-old

student. Mepep predicted that if condoms were somehow to disappear, "people would still have sex -- they'd be scared, but they'd do it."

Vanessa Balla, however, a medical doctor who treats AIDS patients, said the pope has a point.

"With condoms, people think they can do whatever they want," she said. "It just encourages them to engage in really risky sexual behaviors. I've seen it myself -- they take as much risk as possible."

Balla, who said that as a physician "it's incredibly hard to watch young people dying of AIDS," insisted that the solution to the crisis is "not condoms, but changing behavior."

Julienne Christelle Bekono, also a student, said that Western donors and African governments both seem to think that if they shower a country with condoms, they've solved the problem of AIDS, she said. Instead, Bekono called for greater investments in finding a long-term cure -- although she said that condoms should remain part of an across-the-board approach.

Mve Louis Etong, a 52-year-old teacher of linguistics at the University of Yaoundè, said he agreed with the pope that condoms aren't the answer. He offered a logic, however, clearly distinct from that of Benedict XVI.

"You just don't get the same pleasure from sexual intercourse [with a condom] as you do with full contact," Etong said. "That's why many Cameroon men won't use them."

Also on Wednesday, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, issued a statement outlining the position of the Catholic church on fighting what he called "the terrible scourge of AIDS." Lombardi summarized that position in three cornerstones:

- "Education in the responsible use of sexuality -- reaffirming the essential role of marriage and the family?;
- "Research and application of effective cures, getting them to the largest number possible of sick people through many initiatives and health care institutions?;
- "Human and spiritual assistance for AIDS sufferers, and all the sick.?"

The church, Lombardi said, believes that "emphasizing the more widespread diffusion of condoms is not really the most far-reaching and effective means" for combating AIDS and defending human life.

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John Allen is in Africa covering Pope Benedict XVI's March 17-23 trip to Cameroon and Angola. Watch the NCR web site for his daily reports.

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