

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

February 12, 2010 at 3:30pm

Condoms & Theology

by Michael Sean Winters

NCR Today

My friend and colleague Austen Ivereigh has a must-read post up at America today dealing with the challenge of articulating theology, even good theology, in a controversial atmosphere. The particular issue at hand ? condom use to prevent the spread of AIDS ? could scarcely be more controversial and more of a challenge for the hierarchy.

Ivereigh notes that the use of a condom to prevent the spread of a deadly disease is not only pro-life, it is in no meaningful sense of the term prophylactic. The moral intent is not to stifle life but to preserve it. But, he reports, citing reporting by the Tablet's Rome reporter Robert Mickens, that a Vatican official said it was impossible to recognize this moral fact without sowing greater confusion.

Theology is at the service of the Church, and so the concern not to sow confusion is an understandable one. We who consider ourselves on the left side of the theological spectrum have long argued that sound pastoral practice is itself a theological datum. But, what made me most sad about the view expressed by the unnamed Vatican official was a certain assumption about the theological sophistication of the laity. I think most Catholics can understand the difference between condom use for the prevention of AIDS and condom use for the prevention of more children. And, what is more, I think most Catholics understand that moral principles must be applied to a variety of situations and that sometimes this application requires us to live with a degree of ambiguity.

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