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Vatican statement on Benedict XVI and condoms

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NCR Today

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office, issued a statement Nov. 21 in response to wide international coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's comments on condoms in a new book-length interview with the German journalist Peter Seewald.

In essence, Benedict reiterated the church's broad opposition to artificial birth control, but said that in some exceptional cases, where the intent is to prevent disease rather than pregnancy, the use of a condom could be a "first step" towards a greater sense of moral responsibility.

In his statement, Lombardi insists that Benedict has not changed church teaching on condoms, but rather given papal expression to a position long held by moral theologians and other "ecclesial personalities," including a number of cardinals.

The full text of Lombardi's statement follows, in an *NCR* translation from Italian.

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Note of Fr. Lombardi on the words of the pope on the question of condoms

At the end of chapter ten [note: in the English edition, chapter eleven] of the book *Light of the World*, the pope responds to two questions about the struggle against AIDS and the use of condoms, questions which refer back to the discussions which followed some words spoken by the pope on the subject in the course of his trip to Africa in 2009.

The pope clearly reaffirms that he had not meant [in 2009] to take a position on the problem of condoms in general, but simply wanted to affirm strongly that the problem of AIDS cannot be resolved solely with the distribution of condoms, because much more has to be done: prevention, education, help, council, and

staying close to the people ? both so they don't become sick, but also when they are sick.

The pope observed that even in non-ecclesial environments, there's a similar awareness, such as that of the so-called "ABC" approach (abstinence ? be faithful ? condoms), in which the first two elements (abstinence and fidelity) are far more determinative and fundamental for the struggle against AIDS. Meanwhile the condom, in the final analysis, seems like a shortcut when the other two elements are missing. It must be clear, therefore, that condoms are not the solution to the problem.

The pope then broadens the focus, insisting that to concentrate solely on condoms is tantamount to making sexuality into something banal, losing its meaning as an expression of love between persons, and turning it into a sort of "drug." Struggling against the banalization of sexuality is "part of a great effort to see that sexuality is positively understood, and can exercise its positive effect on the human person in his or her totality."

In the light of this ample and profound vision of human sexuality, and its modern challenges, the pope reaffirms that "naturally the church does not consider condoms as the authentic and moral solution" to the problem of AIDS.

Thus the pope is not reforming or changing the teaching of the church, but reaffirming it by placing it in the context of the value and the dignity of human sexuality as an expression of love and responsibility.

At the same time, the pope considers an exceptional situation in which the exercise of sexuality represents a true risk to the life of another. In that case, the pope does not morally justify the disordered exercise of sexuality, but holds that the use of a condom in order to diminish the threat of infection is "a first assumption of responsibility," and "a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality," rather than not using a condom and exposing the other person to a threat to their life.

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In that sense, the reasoning of the pope certainly cannot be defined as a revolutionary shift. Numerous moral theologians and authoritative ecclesiastical personalities have sustained, and still sustain, similar positions. Nevertheless, it's true that until now they have not been heard with such clarity from the mouth of the pope, even if it's in a colloquial rather than magisterial form.

Benedict XVI therefore courageously gives us an important contribution of clarification and deepening on a question that has long been debated. It's an original contribution, because on the one hand it remains faithful to moral principles and demonstrates lucidity in rejecting "faith in condoms" as an illusory path; on the other hand, it shows a comprehensive and far-sighted vision, attentive to discovering the small steps ? even if they're only initial and still confused ? of a humanity often spiritually and culturally impoverished, towards a more human and responsible exercise of sexuality.

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