

On AIDS, Benedict avoids the 'C' word

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 19, 2011 NCR Today

Ouidah, Benin

Heading into Pope Benedict XVI's Nov. 18-20 trip to Benin, one bit of drama was whether this African outing, like the last one two years ago, would be engulfed by controversy over the pope's stance on condoms and AIDS.

That now seems unlikely, for a simple reason: The 'C' word has not passed from the pope's lips.

Instead, Benedict struck a holistic tone on the subject of HIV/AIDS during this Africa outing, calling for 'integral development' and a 'global approach,' including a strong focus on sexual ethics, and omitting any discussion of condoms.

Back in 2009, Benedict ignited debate when he told reporters en route to Cameroon that 'the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms: on the contrary, they increase it.'

In the two years since, perceptions of the pope's attitude have become more nuanced — and, for some, more confusing — in light of a 2010 interview Benedict XVI granted to German journalist Peter Seewald. In it, the pope said that although the church does not regard condoms as a 'real or moral solution' to AIDS, they can nevertheless represent 'a first step in the direction of a moralization.'

The Vatican later insisted that those words marked no change in the Catholic church's opposition to artificial birth control, or to anti-AIDS campaigns which include the distribution of condoms. Nevertheless, some analysts were left wondering if he meant that the church would quietly countenance individuals who use condoms to prevent spreading the disease, even if that choice falls short of behavior the church would regard as ideal.

Nothing Benedict has said in Benin has shed any new light on that question.

HIV/AIDS is, of course, an unavoidable subject for any pope coming to Africa, and Benedict took up the subject in his apostolic exhortation released today titled *Africae Munus*, 'Africa's Commitment,' intended to sum up the results of a 2009 synod of bishops for Africa held in Rome.

In substance, Benedict repeated the clarification issued by the Vatican last year about the church's overall approach to HIV/AIDS, without the line on condoms which triggered it.

Here's what the pope wrote, in the document released today: 'The problem of AIDs, in particular, clearly calls for a medical and pharmaceutical response. This is not enough, however: the problem goes deeper. Above all, it is an ethical problem. The change of behavior that it requires — for example, sexual abstinence, rejection of sexual promiscuity, fidelity within marriage — ultimately involves the question of integral development, which demands a global approach and a global response from the church. For if it is to be effective, the prevention of AIDS must be based on a sex education that is itself grounded in an anthropology anchored in the natural law

and enlightened by the word of God and the church's teaching.?

Benedict went on to endorse institutions and movements working in the field of healthcare, especially treatment of AIDS. He called for research aimed at eradicating the disease, along with other pandemics such as malaria.

The pope also joined calls to make anti-AIDS medications such as anti-retrovirals available at affordable prices: 'The church, indeed, has been pleading for a long time for high quality medical treatment to be made available at minimum cost to all concerned.'

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At the end of this Africa swing, perhaps the best sound-bite for Benedict's message would be the following: On the 'ABC' approach to AIDS - meaning abstinence, be faithful, and condoms - we still may not be exactly sure what all the implications are of Benedict's various declarations on the 'C,' but we can take it to the bank that he believes the heart of the matter lies in 'A' and 'B'.

NCR senior correspondent is traveling with the pope in Benin. Below are a list of stories he has filed so far. Watch the NCR website for updates throughout the weekend.

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