

Catholic AIDS workers on pope and condoms

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Nov. 29, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI's statement on condoms -- that in some circumstances using a condom to prevent the spread of HIV-AIDS could be a step toward moral responsibility -- is not likely to have a huge impact on Catholic programs for the prevention and treatment of AIDS, two experts said.

Msgr. Robert Vitillo, special representative on HIV-AIDS for Caritas Internationalis, said the pope's statement is likely to have a greater impact in pastoral counseling than on the hundreds of prevention and treatment programs offered by the Catholic Church and Catholic agencies throughout the world.

In the book, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times," which the Vatican newspaper excerpted Nov. 20, Pope Benedict repeated what he said during a trip to Africa last year, that "we cannot solve the problem (of AIDS) by distributing condoms."

Focusing exclusively on condoms damages human sexuality, making it "banal" and turning it into a kind of "drug," the pope said in the book. But he went on to say that in particular cases -- he mentioned prostitutes -- condom use may be justified as a first step toward taking moral responsibility for one's actions.

Vitillo said the pope's remarks do not lessen the church's insistence that both the morally correct use of one's sexuality and the safest sexual practice from a health standpoint is "abstinence outside of marriage and faithfulness inside marriage."

Catholic programs providing HIV care, support and treatment emphasize the safest route, he said.

The pope's statement, he said, "acknowledges that not everyone follows church teaching" in that regard, but nevertheless the church does not abandon them; rather, it recognizes that when someone is living in a way that the church does not consider moral, the use of a condom to protect a partner from infection may be the first step in their learning to take responsibility.

Vitillo said the bishops' conferences of Chad and of Southern Africa have issued pastoral letters saying church workers must accompany married couples where one or both spouses are HIV-positive, helping them make a conscientious decision regarding the use of condoms to prevent disease while also understanding church teaching that every sexual act should be open to new life.

In the new book, Pope Benedict did not address the issue of condom use by married couples to reduce the risk of disease.

Lesley-Anne Knight, secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis, said, "The pope's reported comments in this book illustrate the importance of compassion and sensitivity in dealing with the complexities of HIV-AIDS prevention. Caritas delivers its HIV-AIDS programs in line with church teaching and we will consider, in close consultation with the Holy See, whether there are implications for our work in these reported comments of Pope Benedict."

Caritas Internationalis is the Vatican-based umbrella organization of 165 national Catholic charities.

Dr. Leonardo Palombi, who works with the Sant'Egidio Community's DREAM program of AIDS prevention and treatment in Africa, told Catholic News Service Nov. 22 that Africa has been virtually flooded with condoms, yet the disease continues to spread because of a lack of responsibility on the part of men, a lack of respect for women and the lack of antiretroviral treatment for all who need it.

"Condoms aren't the response to everything," Palombi said. In fact, antiretrovirals are even more effective in preventing spread of the disease because "they reduce the viral load in the body and in all body fluids" -- reducing the risk of mother-to-child transmission at birth or through breastfeeding and reducing the risk of transmission sexually as well.

"Condoms are given out and in great quantities in Africa," he said. "But a thousand boxes of condoms won't help if a woman has no power to insist her partner use them."

"Universal access to therapy is the best way to stop the spread of AIDS" and that is what the Catholic Church has been trying to provide for years, Palombi said.

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