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Pope's condom remarks: A step into the real world

by NCR Editorial Staff



The cover of the Italian-language version of the book, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times." (CNS)

Amid the welter of commentary, spin and shock at the few paragraphs Pope Benedict XVI spoke about condoms in his book-length interview, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, one very telling paragraph in the Vatican's follow-up clarification has received little notice. But it says a great deal.

In a statement released to clarify the pope's comments that condom use, while not a "real or moral solution" to the AIDS crisis, could be justified in some cases, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, first states that "the pope considers an exceptional situation in which the exercise of sexuality represents a true risk to the life of another."

He then says: "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."

We would dare to further reduce Lombardi's clarification to a sentence: In this instance, Benedict was being a pastor.

He moved the mark on condoms, providing those in the field dealing with real threats to life a lot more room to maneuver in confronting the disease. And though he's caused some of the most loudly self-proclaimed guardians of orthodoxy to go apoplectic at the thought that the pope might be shading a bit to the relativist side, much of the world and, we presume, most Catholics welcome this new development as a concession to common sense.

Almost as important as the pope's words to German writer Peter Seewald is the acknowledgment in Lombardi's statement that the pope has heard the opinions of other respected church leaders and theologians.

In his explanation, Benedict says that use of condoms to diminish the threat of infecting someone else could signify "a first assumption of responsibility" and "a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality."

In the same way, the pope's acknowledgment of the justification for condom use, however limited, is, as the church reform group We Are Church expressed it, "the Catholic hierarchy's own first step in addressing the realities of sex and sexuality."

It will likely take years before the full impact of Benedict's statements play out within the church. The institution must first do what it thinks necessary to make it appear that nothing new has been said or realized. But this much is clear: Benedict's statements take the discussion out of the absolute and ideal and into the relative and messy world in which we live. It is a world that requires a compassionate pastor.

That Benedict understands that world is apparent in parts of the conversation about AIDS that have not been reproduced. In the interview, he passionately asserts, correctly, that the Catholic church has done more than any other institution to walk with victims of AIDS, especially in Africa, and that condoms alone are not the answer.

What we are likely to see now is the power that comes from understanding pastoral direction.

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