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## Pope's condom remarks leave much unsaid

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Catholics may be sick of this subject, given the overwrought press coverage it has received in recent weeks, but I want to return to what Pope Benedict XVI said about condom use in remarks that appear in the new book *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Sign of the Times*.

I bring this up partly because its ripple effects may go on a long time. I also raise it as someone who has been part of an AIDS ministry at my church since 1989 and, thus, as one who has been with dozens of people, including at least one Catholic priest, as they've fought AIDS and lost.

Because of that, I'm aware that condoms can be fallible. I also know that, finally, the only safe sex is sex inside marriage or a committed relationship between faithful, uninfected partners. And yet I know, too, that no matter what, people will continue to engage in risky sexual behavior. We don't need to approve of that to want to help mitigate the consequences.

So if I were pope (a terrible idea) I would say all of that and also say that if you choose to have risky sex, at least use a condom. That's not, however, what the pope said.

What he said was that if someone does use a condom because of concern about the welfare of his partner, that very concern may be an indication of an awakening to a more moral sense about things. His comment was descriptive, not proscriptive.

Thus, what the pontiff said was not, as the Associated Press quickly decided, a "seismic shift in papal teaching." Will it lead to that? Maybe, but don't bet the farm.

It's not my job to tell the Catholic Church what its beliefs and teachings should be. I have enough trouble making sense of and living up to Presbyterian doctrine. But it is my task to analyze why the pope's recent

condom comment stirred up so much controversy and to figure out what we might learn from that.

All the excitement over this is tied into the Vatican's apparent difficulty doing these two things at once: holding fast to essential doctrine while acknowledging (if not embracing) the reality of modernity and now the vicissitudes of post-modernity.

In fact, as we know from the 1995 book *Sexuality and Catholicism* by NCR's Thomas C. Fox, the church has struggled in this way with issues of sex for a long time. Perhaps the most damaging example is the 1968 papal encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*.

That document, by its refusal to find a pastoral way to help faithful Catholics manage their complicated lives more effectively, did a great deal to estrange large parts of the American church from the Vatican. That's an unhealed wound.

When Pope Benedict spoke recently about condom use, I hoped he might finally have found a way to engage Catholics and maybe even people outside the church who sometimes engage in behavior that trivializes the sacredness of sex. The church should be that moral voice.

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But it didn't happen. It took some time to explain just what Benedict meant about male prostitutes using condoms, but eventually it was clear that he had nothing new to say to people who might benefit from hearing -- and at least secretly might be longing for -- a clear theological and ethical voice that recognizes the messiness of life.

Life, indeed, is messier than we'd like. We sometimes find our children, grandchildren or even fellow parishioners making choices that appall us. I'm not suggesting we simply accept all of that as an immutable reality.

But our churches must find ways to talk frankly and realistically about sex (and lots of other subjects) if we want to have any influence at all.

I regret that the pope didn't do that, again. But perhaps he inadvertently opened the door.

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