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Vatican conference defends church's AIDS strategy

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VATICAN CITY
A Vatican cardinal opened an international conference on AIDS by strongly defending the church's two-pronged strategy against the disease: education of consciences and mobilization of Catholic health resources for patients.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, told more than 100 invited experts May 27 that the church places human dignity at the center of its AIDS policies, which necessarily include a solid ethical dimension.

"Educating people to avoid high-risk behavior, when based on solid moral principles, fully demonstrates its effectiveness and translates into greater openness toward those already affected by the virus," the cardinal said.

"When responsibility for one's own behavior is affirmed, in fact, there is greater awareness of the connection with the rest of the community and greater sensitivity toward those who suffer," he said.

Cardinal Bertone underlined the Catholic Church's massive involvement in treating and caring for AIDS patients through its worldwide network of hospitals, clinics and dispensaries. He said part of the church's effort was to help remove the "social stigma" that is still borne by those with HIV and AIDS.

The cardinal did not mention the question of condoms in AIDS prevention. In previous days, the Vatican newspaper ran two articles saying condom campaigns were unsuccessful in stopping the AIDS epidemic; one article said condom campaigns had increased the possibility of AIDS infection by promoting a false sense of security.

Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, head of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, told the assembly that the conference would take up the crucial issue of access to health care by AIDS patients in poorer countries.

The conference participants included a top U.N. official, medical experts from various parts of the world and theologians.

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