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Priest says condoms can only be part of larger strategy in Africa

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LUSAKA, ZAMBIA -- One Catholic who believes that the focus on condoms can only be one part of a larger strategy is Jesuit Fr. Michael J. Kelly, who, while not currently in Zambia, has worked here for years on the issue of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment.

(Another Jesuit Fr. Michael Kelly -- Michael T. Kelly -- has also been based in Zambia and founded Kara Counseling and Training Trust in 1989, one of the first humanitarian groups fighting the spread of AIDS.)

Fr. Michael J. Kelly said, "The moral question about condom use is quite clear and that their [condoms'] use to prevent HIV transmission is morally acceptable." But, he told *NCR*, "the great snag is that the world has thrown too much weight behind this one mechanism for HIV prevention."

He recalls an international meeting held in the Zambian capital of Lusaka in 2009 in which scholar Anthony Simpson, who teaches at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom, and has conducted extensive field work in Zambia, spoke about his research.

Simpson said that after spending "hundreds of hours interviewing men and women, mostly Catholics, on the intimate details of their married and sexual life," not once did any of them ever say "that they did not use condoms because the church forbade them. They did not use them for other reasons, but not because of any church prohibition."

In his 2009 book *Boys to Men in the Shadow of AIDS: Masculinities and HIV Risk in Zambia*, Simpson noted that the unpopularity of condoms was based on concerns ranging from associations with promiscuity and prostitution to the reduction of sexual pleasure.

"Even when available, condoms were, and remained, extremely unpopular," Simpson wrote. "They might be used early in a relationship. But, instead of being perceived as a barrier to infection, they were rejected as obstacles to pleasure, speed of ejaculation, intimacy and trust."

To Kelly, Simpson's work helps "put some aspects of the condom debate into a different context, not only for Zambia but worldwide."

Kelly, himself a contributor to a 2006 book on ethics and AIDS, noted in the chapter he authored that it is true that Catholic bishops in Zambia have maintained that the use of condoms "is immoral and destructive of the dignity of a person."

But it also true that since that 2002 statement, "an increasing number of very senior Catholic church leaders and theologians have endorsed condom use for married couples." Among them is Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Brussels, who has argued that not using a condom if one is HIV-positive would be a violation of the biblical injunction not to commit murder.

Kelly also noted that the Council of Churches in Zambia, an ecumenical body that includes 22 Protestant churches and 19 church-related organizations (but not the Catholic church), has also endorsed the "responsible" use of condoms, particularly in marriage. This was done not in support of "promiscuity," he noted, but as a way to prevent the spread of the HIV virus, particularly "for discordant couples where one married partner is [HIV] positive."

A key point, Kelly wrote, is "what the churches oppose is the unrestrained promotion of condoms as the primary and universal answer to the reduction of HIV transmission."

"The ethic that underlies this position stands radically opposed to church understanding that sex is such a beautiful, good and wonderful human endowment that it cannot be trivialized. Instead every individual has the responsibility to protect it as their most cherished possession. Hence the practice of sex calls for a sense of personal responsibility that will make a mature and informed judgment even in relation to condom use."

In upholding the principle of individual conscience, he argued, "an increasing number of pastors and ministers in Zambia refer matters of condom use to the individuals concerned who must make their own decision in the light of their Christian faith and of the circumstances in which they find themselves."

That is but one issue facing Zambian Catholics as they grapple with HIV and AIDS. Another is that of visibility and stigma, even within the church itself. One former Catholic nun involved in HIV and AIDS prevention work said progress has been made in reducing stigma within Zambia as a whole. But continued silence, she argued, within the church itself about clergy and women religious who themselves are personally dealing with HIV and AIDS is an impediment. It has no place in a country with such high rates of HIV infection, she said.

The former nun notes that, in the wider world, there are networks of clerics who have publicly announced their HIV status. One of the best-known is the Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha, an Anglican priest from Uganda who is HIV-positive and who recently spoke at the International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C.

By contrast, the former nun knows of at least one Zambian Catholic cleric -- "a very young, vibrant priest" -- who died in silence and even shunned treatment because of the stigma attached to AIDS.

"People kept quiet about it, and that's a big problem -- the silence. The silence within," she said of the institutional church and religious orders. "They're not talking about it." The result? "It doesn't make it easy for the next person to access the services or treatment they need on time."

"If the clergy were open about it, there would be less stigma," she said. And if the church were less secretive, she said, the public in general would see AIDS "as any other disease and see the church as a source of hope."

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