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Pope signals nuance on condoms

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tPope Benedict XVI has signaled that in some limited cases, where the intent is to prevent the transmission of disease rather than to prevent pregnancy, the use of condoms might be morally justified.

tWhile that position is hardly new, in the sense that a large number of Catholic theologians and even a special Vatican commission requested by Benedict XVI have endorsed it, this is the first time the pope himself has publicly espoused such a view.

tThe comments do not yet rise to the level of official church teaching, but they do suggest that Benedict might be open to such a development.

The comments from Benedict come in a book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald titled *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, published in English by Ignatius Press.

Excerpts from the Seewald interview were published today by *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper.

tThe question of condoms arises in chapter eleven, in the context of Benedict?s March 2009 journey to Africa. That trip was largely overshadowed by controversy over comments the pontiff made to reporters aboard the papal plane, to the effect that condoms actually make the HIV/AIDS crisis worse.

tBenedict is clearly still annoyed by that reaction, saying he felt he was being ?provoked? by the question about condoms. The suggestion was that the church is indifferent to HIV/AIDS, when in reality ?the church does more than anyone else,? Benedict says.

tBenedict goes on to say that his point was simply that one cannot solve the problem of HIV/AIDS merely by distributing condoms, something that even secular AIDS experts would concede.

tWhile broadly defending traditional Catholic teaching against artificial birth control, Benedict also suggests that in some limited instances the use of a condom might be morally defensible.

t?In this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality,? the pope says.

tBenedict offers the example of a male prostitute. In that situation, he says, the use of a condom ?can be a first step in the direction of moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants.?

tBeyond the question of prostitution, many mainstream Catholic moral theologians have also argued for the moral acceptability of condoms in the case of a married heterosexual couple where one partner is HIV-positive

and the other is not. In that set of circumstances, theologians have argued, condoms would be acceptable since the aim is not to prevent new life, but to prevent infection.

tBack in 2006, Benedict asked the Pontifical Council for the Health Care Pastoral under Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, who has since retired, to examine precisely that question. Having polled the doctors and other health care professionals, as well as theologians, who consult with the council, Barragán presented the pope with a tentatively positive response ? that in the case of couples where one partner is infected with HIV and the other is not, condoms could be justified.

tTo date that position has not been officially codified, and some Vatican officials have said on background that they worry doing so would be seen publicly as a blanket endorsement of condoms. Yet Benedict?s comments to Seewald suggest that the pope himself is at least positively inclined to such a development.

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