

The Pope, Condoms and the “Banalization of Sexuality”-- Sorting through the Questions

By Robert L. Fastiggi¹

The Initial News Reports

On the weekend of November 20-21, 2010, the news spread quickly. On Saturday, November 20, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, carried some excerpts of a soon to be published book, *Light of the World*, which records an extended interview between Pope Benedict and the German journalist, Dr. Peter Seewald. One of the excerpts contained some brief remarks of the Holy Father touching on the issue of using condoms to help curtail the spread of AIDS. The cited comments were a portion of some longer ones given by Pope Benedict on the subject in *Light of the World*. The context was the recollection of the Pontiff's remarks on his way to Africa in March, 2009 in which he reaffirmed the Church's conviction that the spread of AIDS could only be overcome by “a humanization of sexuality” not the distribution of condoms. Dr. Seewald then noted that some critics believe “it is madness to forbid a high-risk population to use condoms.” The Holy Father replied:

“There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a 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. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality.”

The next question followed: “Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?” Pope Benedict responded:

“She of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.”

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These brief comments generated some extreme headlines. “In Rare Cases, the Pope Justifies the Use of Condoms,” said the *New York Times*, which also claimed that “Pope Benedict XVI has said condom use can be justified in some cases to help stop the spread of AIDS.”² A *CNN Report* headline for Nov. 20 proclaimed: “Pope Approves Use of Condoms in Fight Against AIDS,” and, in similar fashion, the *Telegraph* in the United Kingdom reported, “The Pope Drops Catholic Ban on Condoms in Historic Shift.”³ Taking these headlines at face value, *Yahoo News* soon noted that, “AIDS Campaigners Welcome Pope’s U-Turn on Condoms.”⁴

Within 24 hours the Holy See recognized the need for a clarification. In a statement issued on Sunday, November 21, 2010, Fr. Federico Lombardi, S.J., the director of the Holy See’s Press Office, emphasized that, “the Pope is not reforming or changing the teaching of the Church, but reaffirming it, placing it in the perspective of the value and dignity of human sexuality as an expression of love and responsibility.” He then noted that the Holy Father makes it clear that “we cannot solve the [AIDS] problem by distributing condoms,” and “the sheer fixation on the condom implies a banalization of sexuality.” He also reiterated the fact that the Church “does not regard [the use of condoms] as an authentic and moral solution.”

Many sources, though, claimed that Pope Benedict’s words signaled a change in Church teaching.⁵ The *New York Times* spoke of “the Vatican’s first exception to a long-held policy banning contraceptives.”⁶ CNN’s Senior Vatican analyst, John Allen,⁷ stated that the *Light of the World* shows that “the pontiff has flexibility in the church’s opposition to birth control,” and he thought the Pope was making the point that “when somebody is using a condom ... to prevent the transmission of a disease then it would be OK.”⁷ The often-cited Catholic journalist, Rev. James Martin, S.J. spoke of Pope Benedict’s comments as “a game-changer,” and he added that “by acknowledging that

²Rachel Donadio and Laurie Goldstein, “In Rare Cases, Pope Justifies Use of Condoms,” *New York Times* [on-line edition], November 20, 2010.

³Jonathan Wynne-Jones, “Pope drops Catholic ban on condoms in historic shift,” *Telegraph UK* [on-line], November 20, 2010.

⁴“AIDS campaigners welcome pope’s u-turn on condoms,” *Yahoo News UK & Ireland*, November 21, 2010.

⁵Hardly any journalists revealed an understanding that the comments made by Pope Benedict in *Light of the World* were not an exercise of the official papal Magisterium.

⁶Donadio and Goldstein, *New York Times* [on-line edition], November 20, 2010.

⁷“Pope says condoms may be OK in some circumstances,” *CNN Belief Blog* [on-line], November 20, 2010.

condoms help prevent the spread of HIV between people, the pope has completely changed the Catholic discussion on condoms.”⁸

In reaction to the alarming headlines and dubious assertions of the Press, a number of Catholic theologians tried to set the record straight. Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J., the publisher of the English edition of *Light of the World*, made it clear that the Pope did not “justify” the use of condoms at all, and he noted that some of the confusion was due to problems in the Italian translation of the book.⁹ Dr. Janet E. Smith pointed out that a proper reading of the Holy Father’s comments reveals that “he does not in any way think the use of condoms is part of the solution to reducing the risk of AIDS.”¹⁰

The November 23, 2010 Presentation of *Light of the World* and the Subsequent Comments of Fr. Lombardi

On Tuesday, November 23, 2010, there was a formal presentation of the book, *Light of the World*, with speeches given by Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization and the Italian journalist, Dr. Luigi Accattoli. Following the two speeches, Fr. Lombardi answered questions from the Press. One of them inquired whether there was a major difference between the Italian translation of the Pope’s remarks in *Light of the World* as referring to a female prostitute (*una prostituta*) in contrast to a male prostitute as in the original German (*ein Prostituiertes*). Fr. Lombardi responded:

I asked the Pope if there was a serious problem with the choice of the masculine rather than the feminine ... He told me no. The point -- and for this reason I did not make any reference to you [about this] in Sunday’s statement -- is the first step in taking into account the risk to the life of

⁸ Victoria L. Simpson and Nicole Winfield, “Vatican shifts ground on condoms, HIV, conception,” *Associated Press* [on-line], November 23, 2010.

⁹ Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J., “Guestview: Did the Pope ‘justify’ condom use in some circumstances?” *Reuters* [on-line edition], November 23, 2010. Fr. Fessio notes that the German word, “*begründete*,” which means “some basis for” was translated into Italian “one-sidedly” as “*giustificati*” = justified.” Fr. Fessio points out that the Pope was not “justifying” the use of the condom in the case of male prostitutes, he was merely observing that the use of a condom by the prostitute “can be a first step in the direction of a moralization.”

¹⁰ Janet E. Smith, “What does the Holy Father really say about condoms in the new book?” *Ignatius Insight Scoop*, November 21, 2010; Dr. Smith comments were reproduced, in whole or in part, on many other on-line sites; a segment of them appeared in print form in *Our Sunday Visitor* (December 5, 2010), 14.

another with whom I am in relation. This is the same whether it deals with a man or a woman or a transsexual.¹¹

Fr. Lombardi's simple reply led to a flood of exaggerated headlines. On November 23, *MSNBC* [on-line] reported in bold letters: "Pope: Condoms OK for Women with HIV too." The same day the headline for *USA Today* proclaimed: "Vatican: Everyone Can Use Condoms To Prevent HIV." Special interest groups soon began to exploit the misinformation for their own ends. Jon O'Brien, the president of the abortion rights group, "Catholics for Choice," issued a statement in which he claimed that conservatives are now "left clutching at straws." He went on to say that: "One can only hope that [the conservatives] will embrace this new position and advocate for condom use whenever necessary;" and he added: "organizations that have been hesitant to provide condoms to those living with HIV and AIDS must move immediately to put this new teaching into action."¹²

Sorting through the Questions

The dissonance between what Pope Benedict XVI actually said and what the Press claims he said is startling. This why Bishop Samuel Aquila of Fargo, North Dakota issued a statement in which he urged the faithful and all people of good will to "read the entire book" of the Pope. He went on to say: "Do not depend on the media for your understanding of what Pope Benedict states; rather go to the source in order to find the

¹¹ "Papa/ Vaticano: Su condom indifferente 'prostituto' o 'prostituta,'" Città del Vaticano, 23 nov. [2010], *Apcom* [Italian News Agency]. My translation of the Italian report which reads: "*Ho chiesto al Papa se c'era problema serio di scelta nel maschile piuttosto che nel femminile*", ha spiegato Lombardi nella conferenza stampa di presentazione del volume. "*Lui mi ha detto di no*". "*Il punto – e per questo non vi ho fatto alcun riferimento nella nota di domenica – è il primo passo di responsabilità nel tenere conto del rischio della vita dell'altro con cui io sono in rapporto. Se si tratta di un uomo o di una donna o di un transessuale è lo stesso*".

¹²"Pope's Clarification Reveals Significance of Condom Statement," Press Release of November 23, 2010 found on: <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/popesclarification.asp>. [Accessed Nov. 27, 2010].

truth and not someone's misunderstanding and false interpretation of what was actually stated."¹³

In what follows, I will try to sort out the different questions that have arisen in wake of the Holy Father's comments about condoms and the HIV problem in *Light of the World*. I will try to offer some brief comments on each issue.

1). Has the Pope approved the use of condoms as a means for the prevention of the spread of AIDS?

The answer here is no. The Holy Father specifically says the use of the condom "is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection," and he makes it clear that the Church "does not regard it [the condom] as a real or moral solution." When asked: "Is [the Pope] saying that in some cases condoms can be permitted?" Cardinal Raymond Burke, the prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, replied: "No, he's not. I don't see any change in the Church's teaching ... in fact he makes the statement very clearly that the Church does not regard the use of condoms as a real or moral solution."¹⁴ In a similar vein, Fr. Fessio observed: "In sum, the Pope did not 'justify' condom use in *any* circumstances. And Church teaching remains the same as it has always been -- both before and after the Pope's statements."¹⁵

2). If the Pope did not approve the use of condoms as a general policy, did he not indicate that it could sometimes be used as the "lesser evil" in particular cases: for example, with prostitutes?

The Pope did not actually approve or justify the use of condoms by prostitutes. Some have claimed that he regarded condom use by prostitutes as the "lesser evil," but he never refers to condoms in such terms nor does he justify their use. In other words, Pope Benedict was not *recommending* that prostitutes use condoms to help prevent the spread

¹³ "Bishop: Read the Pope's Condom Comments; Urges Faithful to Go to the Source, Not to Trust the Media," *Zenit*, November 22, 2010.

¹⁴ John Burger, "Cardinal Burke: What the Pope really Meant," *National Catholic Register: Daily News* [on-line], November 23, 2010.

¹⁵ Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J. in *Reuters*, November 23, 2010.

of the HIV virus. It would be incongruous for him to recommend something he does not consider a “real or moral solution.” In the example of the prostitute using a condom, the Holy Father was merely *recognizing* that using a condom “can be a first step in the direction of a moralization.” The Pope was speaking here as a pastor of souls who understands that even those engaged in evil sometimes show signs of moral sensitivity and movements toward conversion. Janet Smith gives the example of bank robbers using guns without bullets and Fr. Fessio speaks of muggers using padded pipes to reduce injuries. *Recognizing* some diminished evil in such choices is not the same as *recommending* robbing banks with blank bullets or mugging people with padded pipes. Even with these mitigated aspects, robbing banks and mugging people remain moral evils. Similar examples can likewise be provided. For example a man who engages in pre-marital sex might decide to limit himself to sex only with women he would offer to marry if pregnancy occurs. This might be a first step in the direction of a moralization but this does not mean the Church can approve of his fornication. Likewise, a Catholic cohabitating couple might decide to marry in a civil ceremony after the birth of their first child. The Church can recognize in this decision a moral awareness, but this does not mean she can approve of Catholics uniting in civil rather than sacramental marriages. In a similar way, the Holy Father recognizes that a prostitute using a condom to help reduce the spread of HIV infection might, on a subjective level, be making a first step toward moral conversion. Ultimately, the Church would hope for the prostitute to give up the evil of prostitution and live in a chaste manner. As the Bishops of Kenya note: “The Holy Father brings out an important point, that even those who find themselves deeply entrenched in immoral life, can gradually journey towards a conversion, and acceptance of God’s laws.”¹⁶

3) Some people think it was significant the Pope said there was no difference whether the prostitute was male or female. Does this acknowledgement by the Pope really matter?

¹⁶ Kenya Episcopal Conference, “Statement on Pope Benedict XVI Remarks on Condoms,” 1 December, 2010, no. 9: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201012010599.html>

With a female prostitute there are the added dimensions of the condom operating as a contraceptive in addition to it serving as an intended means for reducing the spread of HIV infection. In the case of a male prostitute, conception is impossible so the condom cannot be intended as a contraceptive means. The acknowledgement by the Holy Father would only matter if he were actually approving the use of condoms by prostitutes. Then it could be said that he was approving the use of a condom, which, in the case of female prostitutes, acts as both a contraceptive and a means for reducing the spread of HIV. As explained above, however, the Holy Father was *not* approving the use of condoms by prostitutes, whether male or female. He was merely observing that in the intention of the prostitute to reduce the risk of infection there is a possible “first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.” As Fr. Lombardi explained on November 23, *this* point is the same whether it was a case of a female prostitute, a male prostitute or a “transsexual.”

4) Some Catholics, including bishops, seem to be open to a limited use of the condom, not as an intended contraceptive, but as a means for reducing the spread of AIDS. Has the Pope distanced himself from this view?

The Church has yet to make an absolute definitive pronouncement in this regard, but the clear consensus of Catholic leaders, including Pope Benedict, is one of strong opposition to condom use as a general policy to prevent the spread of AIDS.¹⁷ In the last decade, statements by the Southern African Bishops Conference, the Indian Bishops Conference, the Pontifical Academy for Life, and the Pontifical Council for the Family have all

¹⁷ Judging from what Pope Benedict himself says in *Light of the World*, it is clear that he does not believe we can solve the problem of AIDS “by distributing condoms.” In the formal presentation of November 23, 2010, however, Dr. Luigi Accattoli claimed that, “[the Holy Father] with caution and courage searches for a pragmatic way by which missionaries and other ecclesial workers can help to overcome the AIDS epidemic without approving but also without excluding - in particular cases - the use of the condom (169ff).” My translation of the Italian which reads: “*Cerca con cautela e coraggio una via pragmatica attraverso cui i missionari e altri operatori ecclesiali possano aiutare a vincere la pandemia dell'aids senza approvare ma anche senza escludere - in casi particolari - l'uso del profilattico (169ss).*” In spite of this claim, there is no evidence that the Pope actually believes there are “particular cases” in which the use of condoms can be morally justified.

rejected condom use as an effective means for combating the spread of AIDS. There are several reasons for this position.

First, from a purely medical point of view, condoms only reduce rather than eliminate the risk of infection. Even groups that promote condoms to overcome the spread of HIV admit that they only have an effectiveness rate of 69-90%.¹⁸ In cases of men having anal sex with men, failure rates have been reported at 16.6%.¹⁹ The AIDS virus is roughly 450 times smaller than the spermatozoon [the sperm cell] and some believe it can, at times, pass through the latex of the condom.²⁰ Based on objective research, some leading scientists and bioethicists have come to defend Pope Benedict XVI's conviction that condoms are not the solution to the spread of AIDS.²¹ Campaigns promoting condom use are dangerous because they increase promiscuity and give condom users a false sense of security.²² In his June 10, 2005 speech to visiting bishops from five African countries, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his deep concern "over the devastation caused by AIDS and related diseases." The Holy Father, however, noted that, "the traditional teaching of the Church has proven to be the only failsafe way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS."

¹⁸ UNAIDS/04.32 English original (June, 2004). See also *AMFAR AIDS Research Issue Brief 1* (Jan. 2005) in which it is stated that, when used correctly, condoms have an effectiveness of 80-95% of preventing HIV infection. Of course, many times the condoms are not used correctly due to human factors.

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Stone et al. "Correlates of Condom Failure in a Sexually Active Cohort of Men Who Have Sex with Men," *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency and Human Retrovirology* Vol. 20(5), 15 April 1999, pp. 495-501. There is a difference between failure rates (due to breakage, slippage, etc.) and effectiveness rates, which are influenced by many human factors such as unplanned sexual encounters, etc.

²⁰ Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo (1935-2008) who served as the president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, once described campaigns promoting condom use as playing "Russian roulette" with AIDS: "Cardinal López Trujillo on Ineffectiveness of Condoms to Curb AIDS," Interview in *Zenit*, November 11, 2003. While this statement was disputed by some scientists, they admitted the Cardinal's comparison of the size of the HIV virus to a spermatozoon was correct: see "Condoms: The Science," *BBC News* [on-line] June 24, 2004. The dispute is whether the rate of condom ineffectiveness is due to the ability of the HIV virus to pass through the latex of the condom or other factors such as improper use, poor quality, tearing, slippage, etc.

²¹ After Pope Benedict XVI's comments made on his way to Africa in March, 2009, Dr. Edward C. Green, a senior research scientist at the Harvard School of Public Health, published an article in the March 29, 2009 issue of *The Washington Post* entitled "The Pope May Be Right." In Italy, Dr. Renzo Puccetti, a specialist in internal medicine, and Dr. Cesare Cavoni, a bioethicist, co-authored a book, *Il Papa ha ragione! L'Aids non si ferma con il condom* [The Pope is right! AIDS is not stopped with the condom] (Verona, Italia: Fede e Cultura, 2009). See also, "Authors Say Pope is Right about Condoms and AIDS," *Zenit* Oct. 9, 2009.

²² See Brian Clowes, Ph.D., "Case Against Condoms: Death by Latex" available on the website of Human Life International: <http://www.hli.org/index.php/the-case-against-condoms/320?task=view>

Statistics support the wisdom of the Church's policy. An abstinence-based program in Uganda reduced the AIDS infection rate from 29% to 4% in ten years while a condom campaign in Botswana led to an increase of HIV infection (from 27% to 45%) among urban pregnant women.²³ If condoms have a 10-15% failure rate in preventing pregnancy,²⁴ it only stands to reason that they can fail to stop the HIV virus. Leakage rates of condoms can range from 0.9% to 22.8%.²⁵ A woman can get pregnant only during a limited time (5-8 days) of her fertility cycle, while HIV can be transmitted at any time of the same cycle. This is why the First Lady of Kenya, Lucy Kibaki, in a May, 2006 speech given to Kenyan schoolgirls, lamented how the promotion of condom use was increasing the spread of AIDS in Kenya and other African countries.²⁶

5) Some Catholic theologians and bishops seem to be open to the use of the condom in the case of spouses affected with the HIV virus. Has the Pope accepted or condemned their view?

Nothing Pope Benedict has said manifests support for this view even if he has not explicitly or formally condemned it. Several years ago, this issue received a significant amount of media attention. In an April 21, 2006 interview, which appeared in the Italian weekly, *L'espresso*, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini (the retired Archbishop of Milan) stated that the use of condoms could be justified as "a lesser evil" (*un male minore*) in a marriage when one of the spouses is infected with AIDS. Several other Catholic leaders, including Cardinal Godfried Daneels of Belgium, have made similar statements, and Fr. Martin Rhonheimer of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome has defended

²³ See Fr. Thomas D. Williams, "Idle Speculation: AIDS, Condoms and the Catholic Church," *National Review* [online] May 17, 2006 and also Clowes, "Case Against Condoms."

²⁴ Cf. Clowes, "Case Against Condoms;" and also "Cardinal López Trujillo" Interview in *Zenit*, November 11, 2003; see also *Up To Date* 18.3 (September, 2010) which notes that "about 15% of women will get pregnant during first year of typical use" [of the condom].

²⁵ B. Voeller et al., "Viral Leakage Risk Differences in Latex Condoms," *AIDS Res. Hum. Retroviruses* 1994 June 10(6): 701-710.

²⁶ Peter Smith, "Kenya First Lady: Condom 'is causing the spread of AIDS in this country,'" LIFESITENEWS.COM (May 23, 2006).

possible condom use from a slightly different perspective.²⁷ The basic argument, though, is that the use of the condom to prevent the spread of the HIV virus is not contraception because the condom is intended as a means for protecting against the spread of infection rather than as a means for hindering procreation.

Janet E. Smith has provided a detailed and compelling refutation of this argument.²⁸ When a condom is used, the marital act is deprived of its unitive and procreative orientations. Even if there is known sterility, marital acts are still procreative in type even if they are not procreative in effect. Moreover, the use of the condom frustrates the natural unitive dimension of the conjugal act, which requires insemination in the vagina. This is why some canonists question whether a marriage is truly consummated when a condom is used.²⁹ The intended use of the condom as protection from the spread of the HIV infection does not change the moral object of using a condom, which, by its nature, frustrates the unitive and procreative ends of the marital act. According to Catholic moral doctrine, each and every marital act must remain “ordered *per se* to the procreation of human life” (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2366, and Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* [HV], no. 11). Such intrinsic ordering is absent in sexual relations using a condom. Furthermore, Paul VI specifically rejected an appeal to the principle of “the lesser evil” as justification for contraceptive sexual acts (cf. *Humanae Vitae*, 14).

Apart from the contraceptive character of the condom, there is also the medical danger of spreading the HIV virus. If a husband were infected with the HIV virus, would he really wish to put his wife at risk of being infected? As noted above, even scientists who support condoms to reduce the spread of HIV admit that they cannot guarantee against infection.

Concluding Remarks: the Holy Father’s Warnings about “the Banalization of Sexuality”

²⁷ Cf. Benedict Guevin and Martin Rhonheimer, “On the Use of Condoms to Prevent Acquired Immune Deficiency,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 5:1 (Spring 2005), 37-48.

²⁸ Janet E. Smith, “The Morality of Condom Use by HIV-Infected Spouses,” *The Thomist* 70:1 (January, 2006), 27-69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

In *Light of the World*, Pope Benedict warns that: “the sheer fixation on condoms implies a banalization of sexuality, which, after all, is precisely the dangerous source of the attitude of no longer seeing sexuality as the expression of love, but only a sort of drug that people administer to themselves.” At the heart of the Holy Father’s message is the appeal for a true “humanization of sexuality” based on faithful, monogamous marriage open to procreation. As a young theology professor, the Holy Father lived through the tumultuous days of the 1960s and 70s when the sexual revolution was in full bloom. He knows first hand the harmful social and personal effects engendered by “the banalization of sexuality.” This is why he believes that “the sheer fixation on the condom” is really part of the problem not the solution to the terrible spread of AIDS. As the Bishops of Kenya observe, it is only “a true change of heart or conversion that will give sexuality its human and even supernatural value.”³⁰

Unfortunately, many people think the mere distribution of condoms is the solution to the tragic pandemic of AIDS. This is really a simplistic solution akin to those who address teenage pregnancy by simply handing out contraceptives. The true “humanization of sexuality” requires the hard work of conversion and life-style changes. Sadly, the reactions of the Press to the excerpts of *Light of the World* seem to reveal the very “fixation on condoms” and the “banalization of sexuality” that Pope Benedict wishes to overcome.

³⁰ Kenya Episcopal Conference, “Statement on Pope Benedict XVI Remarks on Condoms,” 1 December, 2010, no. 7.