

20.11.2010 - AP

Pope: condoms can be justified in some cases

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI says in a new book that condoms can be justified for male prostitutes seeking to stop the spread of HIV, a stunning comment for a church criticized for its opposition to condoms and for a pontiff who has blamed them for making the AIDS crisis worse.

The pope made the comments in a book-length interview with a German journalist, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times," which is being released Tuesday. The Vatican newspaper ran excerpts on Saturday.

Church teaching has long opposed condoms because they are a form of artificial contraception, although it has never released an explicit policy about condoms and HIV. The Vatican has been harshly criticized for its opposition.

Benedict said that condoms are not a moral solution. But he said in some cases, such as for male prostitutes, they could be justified "in the intention of reducing the risk of infection."

Benedict called it "a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way of living sexuality."

He used as an example male prostitutes, for whom contraception is not an issue, as opposed to married couples where one spouse is infected. The Vatican has come under pressure from even some church officials in Africa to condone condom use for monogamous married couples to protect the uninfected spouse from getting infected.

Benedict drew the wrath of the United Nations, European governments and AIDS activists when he told reporters en route to Africa in 2009 that the AIDS problem on the continent couldn't be resolved by distributing condoms.

"On the contrary, it increases the problem," he said then.

Journalist Peter Seewald, who interviewed Benedict over the course of six days this summer, raised the Africa condom comments and asked Benedict if it wasn't "madness" for the Vatican to forbid a high-risk population to use condoms.

"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," Benedict said.

But he stressed that it wasn't the way to deal with the evil of HIV, and elsewhere in the book reaffirmed church teaching on contraception and abortion, saying: "How many children are killed who might one day have been geniuses, who could have given humanity something new, who could have given us a new Mozart or some new technical discovery?"

He reiterated the church's position that abstinence and marital fidelity is the only sure way to prevent HIV.

Cardinal Elio Sgreccia, the Vatican's longtime top official on bioethics and sexuality, elaborated on the pontiff's comments, stressing that it was imperative to "make certain that this is the only way to save a life."

Sgreccia told the Italian news agency ANSA that that is why the pope on the condom issue "dealt with it in the realm of exceptionality."

The condom question was one that "needed an answer for a long time," Sgreccia was quoted as saying. "If Benedict XVI raised the question of exceptions, this exception must be accepted ... and it must be verified that this is the only way to save life. This must be demonstrated," Sgreccia said.

Christian Weisner, of the pro-reform group We Are Church in the pope's native Germany, said the pope's comments were "surprising, and if that's the case one can be happy about the pope's ability to learn."

William Portier, a Catholic theologian at the University of Dayton, a Marianist school in Ohio, said he had not read the report in the Vatican newspaper, but he said it would be wrong to conclude that the comments mean the pope has made a fundamental, broad change in church teaching on artificial contraception.

"He's not going to do that in an offhand remark to a journalist in an interview," Portier said.

In other comments, Benedict said:

— If a pope is no longer physically, psychologically or spiritually capable of doing his job, then he has the "right, and under some circumstances, also an obligation to resign."

— On Islam, in Europe, he declined to endorse such moves as France's banning the burqa or Switzerland's citizen referendum to forbid topping mosques with minarets.

"Christians are tolerant, and in that respect they also allow others to have their self-image," Benedict replied when asked if Christians should be "glad" about such initiatives. "As for the burqa, I can see no reason for a general ban."

— He was surprised by the scale of clerical sex abuse in his native Germany and acknowledged that the Vatican could have better communicated its response. "One can always wonder whether the pope should not speak more often."

— On Pope Pius XII, the wartime pontiff accused by some Jewish groups of staying publicly silent on the Holocaust: Some historians have asked the Vatican to put Pius' sainthood process on hold until the Holy See opens up its archives from his papacy. But Benedict said an internal "inspection" of those unpublished documents failed to support "negative" allegations against Pius.

"It is perfectly clear that as soon as he protested publicly, the Germans would have ceased to respect" Vatican extraterritoriality of convents and monasteries who were sheltering Jews from the Nazi occupiers in Rome. "The thousands who had found a safe haven ... would have been surely deported," Benedict argued.

In the book, Benedict also offers insights into his private life, saying he enjoys watching TV at home in the evenings with his secretaries and the four women who take care of his apartment, preferring the evening news and an Italian TV show from decades ago "Don Camillo and Peppone" about a parish priest and his bumbling assistant.

He said he always wears his white cassock, never a sweater, and wears an old Junghans watch that was left to him by his sister when she died. When he prays, he said, he prays to the Lord as well as the saints and considers himself good friends with Sts. Augustine, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas.

Zuletzt geändert am 20.11.2010