

Europe greets Pope Benedict's condom remarks as 'evolution, not revolution'

Pope Benedict's view that there might be rare cases where condom use is acceptable comes at a time when the Catholic church's image in Europe has been battered by child abuse scandals.

By Robert Marquand, Staff writer / November 22, 2010, Paris

Vatican officials are insisting that Pope Benedict's new remarks on condoms are not a change in church teaching on contraception. But initial reaction in Europe and among Roman Catholics here is that the first papal acknowledgment of condom use is an important "evolution of theology" and a "liberation" from a church position that many of the Catholic faithful struggle to defend.

Secular Europe is a region that Pope Benedict views as critical to rebuilding Roman Catholicism. The pope's notice of acceptable condom use in some cases, such as by male prostitutes, may be a technically narrow shift; the pope also stated that "fixating on condoms is a trivialization of sexuality."

But given the Vatican's more conservative direction under Benedict, this is being read as a shift from negative to positive language on matters related to sexual behavior – at a time when the public image of the church in Europe is badly damaged over priestly child abuse scandals in Ireland, Germany, and Belgium.

Catholic bishops in Europe noted Monday that the previous pontiff, John Paul II, had never spoken of condoms, and praised Benedict for his courage in doing so.

"It is an evolution, not a revolution," argues Xavier Lacroix, a theologian at Catholic University in Lyon, France. "I observe a change of vocabulary ... using words that belong to a positive realm, not only the typical 'lesser evil.' "

Michel Sidibé, director of the United Nations's AIDS program, described it as a "significant and positive step forward."

No core change?

Yet some grassroots Catholic reform groups say papal comment allowing a man to use a condom in certain odd cases does not address any core change.

"If the pope says you can now wear pink shoes instead of red shoes, the public will be ecstatic," says Sigrid Grabmeier, spokeswoman for "We are Church," which was formed in Germany and Austria in protest of severe priestly child abuse cases and which advocates equality for women in the church. "But this step, or idea of a step, is not a change in attitude or in the mind of the church."

The pope's comment comes in a book-length series of interviews by a sympathetic German journalist who did two other books with Benedict when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Before becoming pope, he was responsible for church discipline as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Light of the World," the book's title, attempts to humanize Benedict, a pontiff known both for brilliance and aloofness following a year of scandal that threatens his legacy.

Benedict treads into unusual territory in saying that a pope suffering ill health should consider resigning. He calls the late founder and head of the powerful Legionaries of Christ, Marcial Maciel Degollado, who fathered children and engaged in other sexual misconduct, "a false prophet" and "a mysterious figure" – though he affirms that the Legionaries are a "by and large, sound" group.

Much of the book is an unapologetic defense of various Benedict positions. He defends a speech in Regensburg, Germany, in 2006, that many in the Muslim world found offensive, even as he backs a Muslim woman's right to wear a burqa. There is a defense of his reinstatement in 2009 of a radical right-wing bishop who denies the Holocaust, as well as an explanation of the "impossibility" of ordaining women in the Catholic church.

Child-abuse scandals

The priest-pedophile scandals this spring, coming in a self-proclaimed "year of the priest" in the church, were "a volcano of filth" brought by the "devil," Benedict says. But he admits the church must confront child abuse, and that not to do so is a "declaration of bankruptcy for an institution that has love written on its banner."

But there are lighter moments, such as when the pope says he and his inner circle likes to kick back and watch DVDs, especially the "Don Camillo" Italian comedy films of the 1950s and 1960s that depict a small-town parish priest who engages in lighthearted repartee with the local communist mayor.

Peter Seewald, the German author who conducted the interviews, said today in German media that pedophilia and positions on homosexuals and the ordination of women are "marginal problems" for the church "in comparison with the tragic loss of faith among its members and the decreasing practice, but they are part of the greater public's expectations...."

The pope, Mr. Seewald continues, "does not reinvent the church's discourse, but he manages to give it a new light which, I believe, is of great help to us all."

Benedict headed for his native Germany

Transcripts from the new book appeared on the Vatican news website within 24 hours of an announcement that Benedict will visit his native Germany as pope for the first time, and news that 24 new cardinals have been selected, most from Italy.

In much of the European and American Catholic worlds, many faithful believers are known to use contraception, despite church teachings.

The Vatican did appear to hope for a public relations success, while maintaining a position of theological continuity. Vatican media head Frederico Lombardi said that talk on condoms has "not been heard until now with such clarity from the mouth of the pope, even if it's in a colloquial rather than magisterial form."

Christina Odone, Catholic columnist for the Telegraph in London, says the pope removed the chief argument used by church skeptics.

In a blog titled "The Pope's Condom Ruling is a Liberation," Ms. Odone writes that: "The philosopher Pope has freed his people from an ugly ghetto. We languished there, vulnerable targets of strident secularists who portrayed the teaching on condoms as the essence of a backward Church. We were full of self-doubt as we had to defend the indefensible. Now, Benedict has sprung us out of this captivity: we can get on and do good."

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/1122/Europe-greets-Pope-Benedict-s-condom-remarks-as-evolution-not-revolution>

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