

Vatican says teaching on condoms unchanged

by [Francis X. Rocca](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

According to the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI's comments published late last year about condoms do not mark a change in "Catholic moral teaching" or "pastoral practice" on AIDS prevention or contraception.

The statement by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the Catholic Church's highest doctrinal body, represents a rare official clarification of a pope's words from a Vatican agency. It came in response to widespread controversy and confusion over Benedict's remarks about condoms in "Light of the World," a lengthy interview with the pope published in November and prompting a clarification before Christmas.

Some commentators had interpreted Benedict's words as constituting a reversal of the church's longstanding opposition to condom use for disease prevention and even a possible shift in Catholic teaching against contraception more generally.

While insisting that condoms are not a "real or moral solution" to the AIDS epidemic, Benedict had said "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."

The pope had offered the hypothetical example of a male prostitute, whose condom use could "be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility" in not spreading a disease to his partner. (Benedict later added through a spokesman that his statement would apply equally well to the case of a female prostitute.)

On

December 21, the Vatican insisted that nothing had changed. "The thought of the pope has been repeatedly manipulated for ends and interests which are entirely foreign to the meaning of his words," said the statement. It added that it would be "completely arbitrary" and "in no way justified" to suggest that Benedict had sanctioned the use of condoms "to avoid an unwanted pregnancy."

The statement noted that

Benedict, in the same interview, promoted the use of "natural family planning," the only form of birth control permitted by Catholic teaching.

While acknowledging that a prostitute or client "who uses a condom in order to diminish the risk posed to another person is intending to reduce the evil connected with his or her immoral activity," the Vatican statement cautioned against describing such a case in terms of its being the lesser evil. "An action which is objectively evil, even if a lesser evil, can never be licitly willed," the Vatican said, underscoring that the "church teaches that prostitution is immoral and should be shunned."

According to

Robert A. Gahl Jr., an American priest who teaches ethics at Rome's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, the Vatican statement "makes clear that the pope in no way intended to recommend that anybody use a condom under any circumstances. He was not trying to say anything new about contraception or condoms."

The statement does not address

the plight of married couples in which one partner is infected with HIV and whether they may use condoms merely to prevent transmitting the virus.

A long-awaited study by the Vatican health-care office was expected to address that question, but earlier this year an official of that office said that work on the study had been indefinitely suspended. —RNS