Vatican to weigh condoms in fighting AIDS

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The morality and effectiveness of using condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS will be on the agenda at a Vatican conference this weekend (May 27-28), six months after comments by Pope Benedict XVI again touched off worldwide controversy.

The conference, which will focus on "the centrality of care" in preventing and treating HIV/AIDS, is sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, and is scheduled to include two dozen speakers from across the globe.

One speaker will be Edward C. Green, former director of the AIDS Prevention Research Project at the Harvard School of Public Health, who in March 2009 defended Benedict's statement that condoms actually "increase the problem" of AIDS in Africa.

"Current empirical evidence supports" the pope, Green wrote in a widely discussed article.

Another talk will address Catholic teaching on HIV/AIDS, a highly sensitive subject that Benedict touched on in a book-length interview published last November.

While noting that condoms are not a "real or moral solution" to the AIDS epidemic, the pope said that their use by someone intending to prevent infection could "be a first step in the direction of a moralization" of sexuality.

The Vatican's doctrinal office later insisted that the pope's words did not mark a change in Catholic moral teaching or "pastoral practice" against the use of condoms for AIDS prevention or contraception.

It is not clear whether the conference will address whether condoms are appropriate for married couples in which only one partner is infected with HIV, a question on which the church has made no definitive pronouncement.

The Wednesday (May 25) edition of the official Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, included a piece by Spanish theologian Juan Jose Prez-Soba, arguing that couples in such a predicament should abstain from sex, because intercourse performed with a condom is, "from the moral point of view, not a fully conjugal act."