

Cardinal Pell Responds to Media Criticism of Pope "Choice, Not Condoms, Make the Difference with AIDS"

SYDNEY, Australia, APRIL 21, 2009 (Zenit.org).- Here is an article by Cardinal George Pell, archbishop of Sydney, that appeared Saturday in the Sydney Morning Herald, responding to a journalist's criticism of him and the Pope. In a television interview, the cardinal expressed support for Benedict XVI's statements on condoms as an insufficient means to fight AIDS. On April 11, a herald journalist criticized the statements in an article titled "Pell rides papal bandwagon of death." The following is Cardinal Pell's response.

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Choice, not condoms, makes the difference with AIDS

By Cardinal George Pell

On St Patrick's Day, Pope Benedict spoke about the Catholic Church's teachings and the spread of AIDS in Africa. His comments provoked a storm of indignation, much of it genuine if uninformed, but a deal of it ferocious and disingenuous. It helps to be clear about what he said.

The Pope rejected the notion that the Catholic attitude was unrealistic and ineffective, adding: "If there is no human dimension, if Africans do not help [by responsible behavior], the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms; on the contrary, they increase it."

During an Easter television interview, I supported Pope Benedict's comments. I said: "I agree with him totally [about condoms] because they're encouraging promiscuity, because they're encouraging irresponsibility." I also said: "The idea that you can solve a great spiritual and health crisis like AIDS with a few mechanical contraptions like condoms is ridiculous."

My comments, too, prompted a reaction, including one from the Herald's David Marr, who galloped into the fray to defend the sexual revolution against what the Pope and I had said. He even mentioned Africa a couple of times. "How many good Catholics will die in Africa and the Philippines," he asks, before they learn?

At the heart of Marr's position is a fundamental misconception, which he states as follows: "And we know in our hearts -- and every reputable study confirms -- that the church's call for abstinence is useless."

In fact, the studies confirm that behavior modification is possible and is occurring. In Cameroon the percentage of young people having sex before the age of 15 has gone down from 35 percent to 14 percent, United Nations AIDS said last year. Uganda has had a 70 percent decline in HIV prevalence since the early 1990s, linked to a 60 percent reduction in casual sex, says a 2004 report in Science. Similar evidence exists in Africa, from Ethiopia to Malawi.

Other studies support my claim that condoms encourage promiscuity and irresponsibility. UN AIDS has found that even when people use condoms consistently, something goes wrong about 10 percent of the time. Condoms give users an exaggerated sense of safety, so that they sometimes engage in "risk compensation." In one Ugandan study, gains in condom use seem to have been offset by increases in the number of sex partners.

Pope Benedict was right to point out that the human dimension in sexual activity is crucial. We are not automatons, slaves to animal instinct. Education campaigns

focusing on fewer partners, less casual sex and less use of sex workers have been key to reducing infection rates.

Earlier this year, the British Medical Journal reported: "In numerous large studies, concerted efforts to promote use of condoms has consistently failed to control rates of sexually transmitted infection," even in Canada, Sweden and Switzerland.

The response of critics to the Pope's comments have been classic examples of diversionary tactics; blame someone else in case people begin to understand that your solution is a significant cause of the problem.

To blame Catholics and Pope Benedict for the spread of HIV/AIDS requires proof that while people are ignoring the first, essential Christian requirement to be chaste before and within marriage, they are slavishly obedient to a second requirement not to use condoms. I doubt anyone thinks that is realistically the case.

Catholic teaching is opposed to adultery, fornication and homosexual intercourse, even with condoms, not because it denies condoms offer health protection, but because traditional Christian moral teaching believes all extra-marital intercourse contradicts the proper meaning of love and sexuality.

Christ called Christians to a different way of living, to a purity of heart where even looking on a woman with aggressive and disordered desire (lust) is wrong.

At least 25 percent of the services and care for people with HIV/AIDS in Africa is provided by the Catholic Church. While the role of a church is different from government, which has to legislate and organize for people of all religions as well as those without, both are required to respect the evidence and good moral values in the programs they deliver.

Catholics are not obliged to protest publicly against every harm minimization program, even when the church urges her members not to participate. In the same way, governments and non-Catholic aid agencies can and will continue to hand out condoms in HIV/AIDS programs, although the evidence suggests they may on balance be exacerbating the problem.

But all of us who want to help prevent and reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS need to respect the evidence about what helps and what doesn't. And the evidence is that it's not condoms which make the crucial difference, but the choices people make about how they use the gift of sexuality.