

Analysis: Pope's comments add to debate on condoms

November 21 2010, By RACHEL ZOLL , AP Religion Writer

(AP) -- With his striking comment on condoms and AIDS, Pope Benedict XVI has started a new chapter in the complex church debate about morality and preventing the spread of HIV.

The Roman Catholic prohibition against artificial contraception is not in question, but Benedict could be carving out a very rare exception for the use of condoms.

Benedict said that condoms are not a moral solution to stopping AIDS. But he said in some cases, such as for male prostitutes, their use could represent a first step in assuming moral responsibility "in the intention of reducing the risk of infection."

He made the remarks in an interview with a German journalist, Peter Seewald, and published as the book, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times." The Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano ran excerpts on Saturday ahead of the book release Tuesday.

Benedict's comments put a spotlight on a nuanced discussion within the church about how best to address the scourge of AIDS.

The pope had previously said that condom use exacerbates the AIDS crisis. Some church officials echoed the sentiment, arguing that condoms are not foolproof and give people a false sense of protection. Abstinence and fidelity are the only way to stop HIV, they said.

Still, the Vatican never released an official, authoritative policy on condoms and [AIDS](#), and cardinals from around the world often took positions on the issue that differed significantly.

William Portier, a Catholic theologian at the University of Dayton, a Marianist school in Ohio, has not yet read the book, but said it would be wrong to conclude that the comments mean the pope has made a fundamental change in church teaching.

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

The pope's circumspect remarks should also not be viewed as encouraging condom use.

However, they could be read as making a distinction between greater and lesser evils, or what moral theologians call double effect, said Michael Baur, a philosopher at Fordham University. An evil may be tolerated for an intended good - in this case, disease prevention.

It is far from the first time such an argument has been made within the church.

The Rev. Martin Rhonheimer, an Opus Dei priest and ethics professor at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, argued in 2004 that an HIV-infected married man who uses a condom to protect his wife from the virus is not trying to block a pregnancy, but to prevent infection. His actions, therefore, could be seen as in accord with Catholic teaching.

"It's an interesting application of ancient moral principles," said Nicholas Cafardi, a canon lawyer and former dean of Dusquesne University School of Law. "Even if you are performing an otherwise evil act, you

can mitigate the evil of the act."

Seewald's book is being released at a time when the pope and the Vatican have tried to overcome their widespread problems in communicating the church's message. Some analysts suggested that the pope's comment on condoms in the book could be just another in a series of public relations missteps.

The English publisher of the book, the Rev. Joseph Fessio of Ignatius Press, argued the pope was not justifying [condom use](#), but was noting that protecting someone from the disease shows the signs of taking moral responsibility for another person.

In the book, the pope also reaffirms church teaching that sex should be between a married man and woman and that artificial contraception blocks God's plan for bringing life into the world.

Yet, even with just the narrow example he gave in the interview, Benedict has created an opening for Catholic bishops in Africa and elsewhere to renew their argument that condoms must be part of the fight against the spread of HIV.

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