

POPE BENEDICT XVI'S AFRICA VISIT AND THE CONDOM DEBATE

by Brian Lewis*

On Monday, 23 March, Pope Benedict XVI brought his seven-day maiden voyage to Africa to an end. Prior to boarding his plane to Rome at Luanda airport, he reiterated the message he had consistently delivered during his visit, calling on those in public office to fight poverty, corruption and violent conflicts for the sake of the common good, not out of self-interest. 'Our hearts cannot find peace', he said, 'while there are still brothers and sisters who suffer for lack of food, work, shelter or other fundamental goods'.

The papal tour of Cameroon and Angola was covered by highly-respected American journalist, John L. Allen, whose daily reports were published in *National Catholic Reporter*.ⁱ The dominant impression his coverage made on him, he said, was the great gap between what was reported internationally and what was actually experienced by Africans. The attention of western reporters was almost exclusively taken up with what the Pope said on the plane en route to Africa in response to a question put by a journalist from French TV about the spread of AIDS and the Church's response to it.



The international media seized upon these words of the reply, taken out of context: 'the scourge cannot be resolved by distributing condoms; quite the contrary, we risk worsening the problem'.ⁱⁱ The ensuing controversy took centre stage in the West at the expense of an adequate and unbiased coverage of the papal visit. The bottom line, as Allen said, is that 'seen from abroad the trip has been about condoms; on the ground it's felt like a celebration of African Catholicism'.

Perceptions in Africa

For African Catholics the papal visit was a tremendous success. Whatever their personal opinion, the issue of condoms as a prevention against HIV/AIDS raised scarcely a ripple, said Allen. After the experience of WYD in Sydney in 2008, the enthusiasm shown by the people in Cameroon and Angola comes as no surprise. Nor does the fact that Benedict himself seemed to be caught up in the enthusiasm. Twice he spoke of Africa as the 'continent of hope'. The liturgical celebrations were manifestations of a deep faith and featured, as one would expect, infectious singing, dancing and music in typical African style. Sitting among the other journalists, Allen commented on the Mass in Yaounde as 'so entertaining that a few of us lost track of time and almost missed our ride' on the bus back to their hotel.

The testimony of the Pope himself is even more telling. Returning to Rome after his visit, Pope Benedict said he had been particularly impressed by the 'delight' of a 'rejoicing Africa' and the sense of the sacred in the continent. In the liturgies, he said, there was 'the presence of the sacred, of God himself; even the movements were always movements of respect and awareness of the divine presence'.ⁱⁱⁱ

African culture is a far cry from that of Australia and it cannot be judged by western standards. Allen makes the point (Report, 17 March) that African Catholics are not much concerned about the dominant issues westerners consider important, but about transforming society. Poverty, climate change, global warming, the ecology are or of more interest to them than issues of sexuality or gay marriage. And social problems loom larger than ecclesiastical concerns. Indeed, for the most part there is peace and harmony in Church communities and the authority of the hierarchy is largely unchallenged.

It would seem that Pope Benedict was well informed about this. It is undoubtedly true that AIDS is a major problem in Africa, but poverty is an even worse disaster. According to UN figures, Allen noted (Report, 18 March), that of the world's 15 most impoverished nations nine are in Africa and that of the deaths occurring

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from armed conflicts in the world sub-Saharan Africa accounts for nine million, as against 1.5 million deaths elsewhere. The Pope did not address the AIDS problem at all during his tour, at least publicly, though of course he may well have discussed it in meetings with the African bishops.

But he did speak a great deal about the dire poverty existing in the country. 'At a time of global food shortages, financial turmoil and disturbing patterns of climate change, Africa suffers disproportionately. More and more people are falling prey to hunger, poverty and disease.'



Benedict is greeted on his visit to Angola

One of the major causes of this poverty he also addressed. 'Regional conflicts, he said, leave thousands homeless or destitute, orphaned or widowed', and human trafficking has become 'a new form of slavery'. Nor did he leave room for doubt about his attitude to violence and corruption. Without wanting to embarrass his host in Cameroon, President Paul Biya, a classic African strongman, Benedict sent shock waves through the nation by stating that Christians must speak out against 'corruption and abuse of power'.

Very little of this was reported in the international press. John Allen is spot on when he says that in consequence the West missed the point and the purpose of the papal visit to Africa and a major disservice was done both to the country and to the Pope. He must have been disappointed about his earlier forecast that 'Benedict's trip offers a window of opportunity to tell Africa's story, both its heartbreak and its heroism'.

The AIDS issue still presents a thorny question and calls for clarification.

1. The first point regards the opportuneness of what the Pope said. Setting aside for the moment what he said about condoms, Allen (Report, 18 March) asked whether the pope's word about condoms on the plane was the right time and place to say it, especially given that it would inevitably obscure the message Benedict was flying to Africa to deliver. Instances of Vatican mistakes are fresh in the public mind and the Pope himself has not always shown that he has the charisma of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. In Allen's view the Pope could easily enough have sidestepped the question, in a way that would not have confused, upset or outraged the international public with the issue of Church and condoms.

As a journalist, Allen would know about this and no doubt he has a good point to make. However, it may well be that Pope Benedict wanted to address the AIDS issue and had a well-prepared reply ready. Looking at what is to follow in this article, a case may be made that the pope's reply was both deliberate and well thought out.

2. Secondly, the Pope's response cannot be fairly assessed without taking into account the whole context. We should begin from the question put by the French journalist:

Your Holiness, among the ills that beset Africa, one of the most pressing is the spread of AIDS. The position of the Catholic Church on the way to fight it is often considered unrealistic and ineffective. Will you address this theme during your journey?

In his reply the Pope first took up the criticism that the Church's position is 'unrealistic and ineffective'. He said: 'I would say the opposite. I think that the most efficient, most truly present player in the fight against AIDS is the Catholic Church herself, with her movements and her various organisations'. Religious communities of brothers, sisters and priests, as well as lay communities, 'do so much, visibly and also behind the scenes' and 'take care of the sick'.

This response by the Pope to the question about the Catholic Church's position in the fight against AIDS is of course not meant to overlook or downplay the sterling work done by other Churches in caring for AIDS-affected people.

In point of fact 25% of AIDS sufferers are cared for by Catholic facilities, rising to 50-100% in many African nations (Report, 17 March).^{iv} In the light of the Church's sound track record in the struggle against AIDS, Benedict pursues his answer: 'I would say that this problem of AIDS cannot be overcome merely with money, necessary though it is. If there is no human dimension, if Africans do not help (by responsible behaviour), the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics: on the contrary, they increase it.'

The Pope is here contrasting two distinct approaches: the typical public policy approach of governments (dependent on money) and the Church's approach (centred on the human person and responsible behaviour). Public policy employs statistics to clarify the problem of AIDS, then it seeks to deal with the problem thus illustrated through suitable strategies and programmes. It is not overtly concerned with individual persons. The Church on the other hand sees the problem in the light of its vision of the human person made in God's image and called to life with God. The Church's programme is to form, lead and challenge persons as a whole, a programme that, the Pope says, accepts what is done according to public policy but is more ambitious than just public health and quite different in quality and spirit.

Against this background, Benedict critiques the public policy reduction to a single means and method of tackling AIDS: '...the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics, they increase it'. In context this is the papal statement that raised such a media furore. In western countries the use of condoms to prevent infection with the HIV virus is taken for granted by many people, but Africa, as is generally pointed out, is culturally very different. The Catholic Church is accused by many westerners of being ultra-conservative or even worse, but Africa, it seems, is again very different.

Condoms and a sense of invulnerability?

As the Director of the African Jesuit AIDS network, Michael Czerny SJ notes, this statement of Pope Benedict raises two distinct issues: the viability of a strategy targeting whole populations, and the morality of the use of condoms in individual cases and situations.^v I will take up first the question of the viability (and morality) of a general strategy, since it is at this level that the Pope speaks. The complex issue of individual cases and situations will be briefly considered in some final comments.

Firstly, in regard to the question of a general strategy, it needs to be said that in what he says about this the Pope does not depart from the official teaching of the Church. His words here are actually a close reflection of the almost unanimous position of the African bishops. He could hardly be expected to go against this combined wisdom of his men on the ground. The bishops' view – expressed both by individual bishops and by whole conferences – is that wide availability of condoms to Africans generally and especially the young encourages a sense of invulnerability, which leads to riskier sexual behaviour and thus aggravates the possibility of infection. This position is not mere opinion or airy-fairy thinking but, the bishops insist, a reflection of their real-world experience.

A typical example is given by Nigerian Archbishop, John Onaiyekan, who states: 'Condoms tend to give a sense of freedom to be sexually reckless, and obviously that is a major cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS'. And according to him, this position is supported by many other organisations and movements, including the Muslim community as a whole. Another bishop, Bishop Nkuo of the Kumbo diocese in Cameroon, adds the practical point that in the bush areas of Africa the quality of condoms is decidedly suspect due to sitting for a long time in a container in port, long exposure to the sun, and rough handling. The prime response to the AIDS scourge, according to the Africa hierarchy, must be the promotion of more responsible sexual behaviour, the insistence on fidelity and abstinence (Report, 18 March).

In support of this position, Czerny maintains that the widely held view in the West that the use of condoms is an effective protection against HIV infection holds true only outside Africa and among identifiable sub-groups, for example prostitutes and gays, not for the general population. He writes that there is no evidence that the strategy of condom use for the protection of health has reduced HIV infection at the level of the whole population.^{vi}

In support of this statement he cites Professor Edward C. Green, director of the Harvard AIDS Prevention Research Project, who stated this week: 'The best evidence we have supports the Pope's comments'. According to his findings, 'The best and latest empirical evidence indeed shows that reduction in multiple and concurrent partners is the most important single behaviour change associated with reduction in HIV-infection rates'. Though many international scientists would find this strongly affirmed position surprising, it is backed by Dr Helen Epstein, a leading author on the fight to combat AIDS today.^{vii}

The African bishops often point to the experience of nations such as Uganda, where the promotion of abstinence as the cornerstone of their anti-AIDS programme has worked well. Czerny^{viii} claims that 95% of Africans between the ages of 15 and 49 are not infected and he quotes the bishops of Kenya:

Even if HIV did not make pre-marital sex, fornication, adultery, abuse of minors and rape so terribly dangerous, they would still be wrong and always have been. It is not the risk of HIV or the sufferings of AIDS, which make sexual licence immoral; these are violations of the Sixth and Ninth Commandments which are sinful, and today in Kenya surely the worst of their many destructive consequences is HIV and AIDS. The Church does not teach a different *sexual morality*, when or where AIDS poses no danger. But this teaching is not easy for 'the world', including the media, to understand, much less accept.

This is borne out by the secular reaction to the Pope's remarks on the plane. Some of those who protest against the Pope (and indeed against two millennia of Christian teaching) seem to want him to champion an ideology of confidence in the condom and to approve of extramarital sex, which is contrary to the whole of Christian tradition.

3. Benedict concludes his comments with his solution to the scourge of AIDS. He makes two points:

(i) There needs to be 'a spiritual and human renewal that would bring with it a new way of behaving towards others... and give spiritual and human strength for proper conduct towards our bodies and those of others'.

The Pope here presents a sexuality that rests on faith in God and respect for persons, rather than on self-gratification and using other persons for one's own pleasure.

(ii) He extols 'true friendship offered above all to those who are suffering, a willingness to make sacrifices and to practise self-denial, to be alongside the suffering... the capacity to suffer with those who are suffering, to remain present in situations of trial'.

The Church in Africa (and other workers in clinics and elsewhere) has been giving such compassion and service to AIDS victims almost from the beginning of the outbreak, whatever their religious persuasion might be. 'These are the factors that help and that lead to real progress' in the struggle against AIDS.

Finally, Benedict hearkens back to the journalist's critique of the Church's response being 'unrealistic and ineffective': 'It seems to me that this is the proper response, and the Church does this, thereby offering an enormous and important contribution. We thank all who do so.'

Czerny calls upon his own experience in Africa to conclude that Pope Benedict XVI's clear statement should resonate with the vast number of Africans, whether Catholic or not. The strategy he proposes, Czerny claims, gels with their own long experience and is what they have come to expect.^{ix}

Benedict does not address the second issue in his remarks on the plane, the question of moral judgment on individual cases and situation. He could not in the circumstances be expected to do so. Rather, he entrusts moral theologians with the work of making the necessary distinctions and applications in particular circumstances.

Condoms to prevent AIDS

It has long been recognised that contraceptives have other uses than the contraceptive one and that in certain circumstances a person may legitimately intend a contraceptive as a preventative, not as a contraceptive. In a special case the distinction was made and approved by the Vatican itself during the chaos of the revolt in the 1960s in the Belgian Congo and the serious danger of nuns being raped and made pregnant.

The prime cause of AIDS is not sexual contact or shared needles, but poverty. AIDS is a justice issue, not primarily a sex issue. Nevertheless, infection is transmitted by sexual contact and intravenous drug abuse.^x These issues must also be addressed.

Over the years the preventative usefulness of the condom has not been considered at all reliable. However, in more recent years the quality and safety of condoms have been greatly improved. There have been cases where they have been used carefully and for an extended period, where one party is HIV-positive without the participating partner becoming infected in the course of two years. In consequence of this development moral theologians have been investigating the possibility that the preventative use of condoms may in certain well-defined cases be morally justifiable without contravening official Church teaching.

Today there is general agreement among Catholic moral theologians 'offering traditional research for a casuistry that protects long-standing teaching while accommodating the value of protecting those at risk from the virus'.^{xi} Further investigation and discussion are ongoing in regard to the situation of the gay community and pastoral workers caring for HIV-infected people. Kevin Kelly offers new directions for moral theologians in the quest for appropriate protection against HIV infection for other classes of people, particularly of women at risk.^{xii}

Pope Benedict, himself an eminent theologian and Supreme Pastor of the Church, must be well aware of these endeavours and directions among moral theologians. An illustration of this is the following, offered by John L. Allen (Report, 17 March). Shortly after his election as Pope, Benedict authorised the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Health Workers to study the limited question of whether married couples, where one spouse is HIV-positive and the other not, could use condoms to block transmission. At the official level this remains an open question and, according to Vatican sources, the Pope's remarks to the media on the plane en route to Africa were not intended to settle the issue.

This means that until this issue is resolved one way or another, Catholic spouses, one of whom is HIV-positive, the other not, are free in conscience to use a condom, not as a contraceptive, but to prevent as far as possible the transmission of the disease.

It belongs to the pastoral tradition and practice of the Church that persons in need of help in their lives should be given personalised assistance by their priest in the formation of their conscience in difficult and complex problems. In this African experience, it would seem that the Pope has acted with wisdom and prudence, leaving individual conscience its own appropriate role in the conduct of life.

i *National Catholic Reporter*, March 20, [Http://ncronline.org](http://ncronline.org)

ii *CathNews*, March 19, 2009

iii *CathNews*, March 26, 2009

iv See Michael Czerny SJ, 'A human and spiritual wake-up call', *Thinking Faith* at www.thinkingfaith.org, March 25, 2009. In what follows I use this British translation of the pope's words.

v *A human and spiritual wake-up call*, p. 2

vi *A human and spiritual wake-up call*, p. 3

vii *Times Online*, March 27, 2009 at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5987155.ece>

viii *A human and spiritual wake-up call*, p. 3

ix *A human and spiritual wake-up call*, p. 4

x See Lisa Sowle Cahill, Aids, Justice and the Common Good, in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, Ed. James F. Keenan SJ. (Continuum: New York, London, 2000), p. 282

xi James F. Keenan SJ, Introduction to *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention* (Continuum: New York, London, 2000), p. 24. Part I of the book considers many cases in this area.

xii Kevin T. Kelly, *New Directions in Sexual Ethics: Moral Theology and the Challenge of AIDS* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998) and 'Conclusion: a Moral Theologian Faces the New Millennium in a Time of AIDS', *Catholic Ethicists*, p. 324-332.