

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Issues > Faith, religious authorities, secularism > Family, women (Religion, churches, secularism) > Religion, churches, secularism: Reproductive rights > **On Condoms, Hope From the Pope**

On Condoms, Hope From the Pope

Monday 29 November 2010, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2010).

Is the pope Catholic? The whole world broke out the champagne the weekend before Thanksgiving when the news came that Pope Benedict XVI had approved the use of condoms in certain circumstances to prevent the transmission of HIV. In *Light of the World*, a new collection of interviews with the German journalist Peter Seewald, the pope says:

“There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality.”

That’s quite a turnaround from last year, when the pope, on a visit to Africa, claimed that condoms were ineffective and indeed only fueled the epidemic. Liberal Catholics are understandably jubilant—“the takeaway is that the pope admits that condoms prevent AIDS,” Catholics for Choice head Jon O’Brien told me by phone. “Catholic health organizations, which receive millions and millions of dollars to fight AIDS, can now say it’s OK to use condoms. That’s incredibly significant.” Or maybe not. On November 22 papal spokesman Father Federico Lombardi denied that the pope had said anything that “reforms or changes” church teaching.

If so, church teaching is even weirder than I thought: gay men, because they are already committing a sin, can protect themselves from a fatal disease, but an infected husband cannot use a condom to protect his HIV-negative wife. Because a priest is more likely to be gay than married? Don’t be so cynical. For the HIV-discordant married couple, sex is not a sin: *contraception* is a sin. To use a condom would make their sacred-married-love sex “banal” and “a sort of drug that people administer to themselves,” as the pope says later, and that is worse than wearing a rubber to prevent the transmission of a fatal illness. As Sacred Heart Major Seminary professor Janet Smith put it in *The Catholic World Report*, “We must note that what is intrinsically wrong in a homosexual sexual act in which a condom is used is not the moral wrong of contraception but the homosexual act itself. In the case of homosexual sexual activity, a condom does not act as a contraceptive; it is not possible for homosexuals to contracept since their sexual activity has no procreative power that can be thwarted.” There’s a logic here, but it’s the loopy follow-the-dots logic that led an Egyptian imam to declare that a woman can work in the same office as men who are not her relatives, as long as she breastfeeds them first.

But wait. Perhaps the pope didn’t mean to specify that the prostitute had to be a man. In German “*ein Prostituerter*” is grammatically masculine but can also be the default gender neutral, the way in certain contexts the English “man” can mean humans of either sex. (Adding to the confusion, in the Italian translation the word is feminine, “*una prostituta*.”) And in fact, the AP reports that the pope means both sexes. “I personally asked the pope if there was a serious, important problem in the choice of the masculine over the feminine,” Lombardi said. “He told me ‘no.’ The problem is this.... It’s the first step of taking responsibility, of taking into consideration the risk of the life of another with whom you have a relationship.”

But that really opens the floodgates, because that female prostitute is not just using a rubber to prevent disease like her male counterpart; she is protecting herself—or technically, her client is protecting her—from pregnancy. And contraception is a sin no matter the consequences of conception. It hasn't mattered that a woman who got pregnant could be beaten or thrown out of her home, that she could lose her job, or that the sex might be rape by a partner or a stranger. Well, actually, in the 1960s, nuns in Congo were permitted to use birth control pills to protect themselves from impregnation by rapist soldiers. Ordinary women, even in wartime, are out of luck.

Nor has it mattered that a woman might be injured or die if she conceives. After all, like AIDS, pregnancy and childbirth can be dangerous. In the developing world maternal mortality rates are themselves an epidemic: according to the World Health Organization, about 350,000 girls and women die in pregnancy or childbirth annually, and this does not take into account birth injuries like fistula or the long-term toll on the body of having many babies too close together. The church has been adamant that women have no right to protect themselves from conception except by periodic abstinence, which requires a cooperative partner and has a real-life failure rate of 25 percent.

The doctrine of the secondary effect, whereby a Catholic may perform an immoral act if its primary effect is moral, permits a doctor to give a dying patient painkillers that may hasten death: the primary purpose is relief of suffering, not euthanasia. By the same logic, the church has always allowed for "just wars" and the deaths of innocents that inevitably take place in them. But, with the exception of those nuns in Congo, this reasoning is rejected when it comes to birth control.

Theoretically, every fertile woman who has sex is at some risk of serious injury or death from pregnancy. In the United States 569 women died in childbirth in 2006, and tens of thousands nearly die every year. The risks of childbearing, even in modern industrialized countries, is one reason having a baby should be a woman's conscious choice. Now that the pope has said people of both sexes can use condoms to protect themselves from a fatal sexual disease, can he not also, by the same logic, say women can protect themselves from the dangers of pregnancy?

Katha Pollitt

P.S.

* November 23, 2010 | This article appeared in the December 13, 2010 edition of *The Nation*.

* Katha Pollitt is well known for her wit and her keen sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime.