

The Pope and condom use to prevent AIDS

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This winter, on his first visit to Africa, **Pope Benedict said that "[AIDS] cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which even aggravates the problems"**. The Pope's statement is at odds with the research on AIDS prevention, and a setback to decades of hard work on AIDS education and awareness. With powerful moral influence over more than 1.1 billion Catholics in the world, and 22 million HIV positive Africans, **these words could dramatically affect the AIDS pandemic and put millions of lives at risk.**

This is not a religious dispute, but a grave public health concern. Personal beliefs of Catholics and all people should be respected, and the Pope's advocacy for a culture of fidelity and respect could be effective in AIDS prevention if condom use were not also discouraged. The Catholic Church engages in a vast amount of social service work, including the care of those living with AIDS. But the **Pope's claim that condom distribution is not an effective AIDS prevention mechanism is not supported by research. It's untrue, and if it diminishes condom use, it will be deadly.** The fact is, HIV and AIDS are prevented by condom use. There is no easy solution to the spread of this tragic disease, but **condoms and education are the best known prevention combination** and have not been found to increase risky sexual behaviour. That is why even priests and nuns working in Africa have questioned the Pope's statements. We may not be able to ask the Catholic Church to change its broader position, but we are asking the Pope to stop actively speaking out against prevention strategies that work. It's important that people of all beliefs, especially Catholics, call on the Pope to exercise care in his leadership on this issue. 25 million people worldwide have already died of AIDS, and 12 million children have been left without parents. If enough of us join this outcry, we will win an important battle in the struggle for a world without AIDS.

Sources:

The official position of the UN and the World Health Organization on condoms and AIDS prevention:

http://www.unaids.org/en/KnowledgeCentre/Resources/FeatureStories/archive/2009/20090319_preventionposition.asp

The Pope's statement opposing condoms (BBC):

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7951839.stm>

European governments criticise Pope Benedict for his statement:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7950671.stm>

Condoms 'aggravate' AIDS scourge, Pope says:

<http://www.nationalpost.com/news/world/story.html?id=1399781>

CNN Report on the Pope's anti-condom position:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhxqvVmgEbg&feature=related>

Vatican backtracking on condom statement:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5934912.ece>

Growth of the Catholic Church in Africa, see:

<http://www.zenit.org/article-18894?l=english> and <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29777984/>

South African Bishop supporting condom use:

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29777984/>

UNAIDS Report on the AIDS epidemic:

<http://www.unaids.org/en/CountryResponses/Regions/default.asp>