

Editorial in The Lancet March 28, 2009

The Vatican felt the heat from an unprecedented amount of international condemnation last week after Pope Benedict XVI made an outrageous and wildly inaccurate statement about HIV/AIDS. On his first visit to Africa, the Pope told journalists that the continent's fight against the disease is a problem that "cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms: on the contrary, they increase it".

The Catholic Church's ethical opposition to birth control and support of marital fidelity and abstinence in HIV prevention is well known. But, by saying that condoms exacerbate the problem of HIV/AIDS, the Pope has publicly distorted scientific evidence to promote Catholic doctrine on this issue.

The international community was quick to condemn the comment. The governments of Germany, France, and Belgium released statements criticising the Pope's views. Julio Montaner, president of the International AIDS Society, called the comment "irresponsible and dangerous". UNAIDS, the UN Population Fund, and WHO released an updated position statement on HIV prevention and condoms, which said that "the male latex condom is the single, most efficient, available technology to reduce the sexual transmission of HIV". Amidst the fury, even the Vatican tried to alter the pontiff's wording. On the Holy See's website, the Vatican's head of media, Father Federico Lombardi, quoted the Pope as having said that there was a "risk that condoms...might increase the problem".

Whether the Pope's error was due to ignorance or a deliberate attempt to manipulate science to support Catholic ideology is unclear. But the comment still stands and the Vatican's attempts to tweak the Pope's words, further tampering with the truth, is not the way forward. When any influential person, be it a religious or political leader, makes a false scientific statement that could be devastating to the health of millions of people, they should retract or correct the public record. Anything less from Pope Benedict would be an immense disservice to the public and health advocates, including many thousands of Catholics, who work tirelessly to try and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS worldwide.