Editor’s Letter

February 1, 2004 By Walter Armstrong

On World AIDS Day more condoms pass hands than on any other day of the year. The Roman Catholic Church, however, marks the occasion in its way. Last December 1, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, the Vatican’s go-to-guy for AIDS, issued the usual maddening pronouncement of contempt and compassion for people with HIV.

The media covers it only to ask: Is the church wavering from its supreme opposition to condoms? The answer is always no, and this year was no exception. Barragan re-affirmed premarital abstinence and marital fidelity as *the only moral form* of HIV prevention. This judgment, with all of its life-and-death implications, was couched in the typical lofty language—from which the word *condom* was, typically and thunderously, absent. Instead he wrote of “policies that foster immoral and hedonistic lifestyles and behavior, favoring the spread of the evil.” Are condoms so “evil” as to be literally unspeakable?

Yet the strange truth is that much of Barragan’s World AIDS Day statement reads like a PWA-empowerment manifesto. It damns “every form of exclusion, discrimination and stigmatization against people with HIV.” Repeating a recent plea from Pope John Paul II, it calls for “a major mobilization of forces and resources to facilitate patients’ access to general medicine for opportunistic diseases and to antiretroviral medicine, so as to stop the scandalous death rate in poor countries that cries to God for vengeance.” More money for a cure. Better protection of human rights. Act up!

But the church made news solely for demonizing sex: Offering only abstinence and fidelity to the imperfect world’s 42 million people infected with a lethal sexually transmitted virus is a blueprint for genocide. This seems hard to square with any divine plan, but many Catholics manage. After all, as the planet’s single-largest caregiver, the church daily does more good works for people with HIV than any other institution. Some 90 percent of Catholics disapprove of the no-condoms policy. Even better, many caregivers at the church’s 100,000 hospitals and 200,000 service agencies actively disobey it. As Nicholas Kristof wrote in the November 27, 2003, *New York Times*, “At the hospital here in Sonsonate, [El Salvador], local priests and nuns often ignore the troglodytes in Rome and quietly [discuss and distribute condoms] and do what they can to save parishioners from AIDS....So what about Vatican teachings? ‘Certainly, God does not want us to kill each other,’ responded Marlene Condon, who works with AIDS patients. ‘You’ve got to do something.’”

Many of these got-to-do-something Catholics had reason to fear much worse from the Vatican on World AIDS Day. Two months earlier, in the British documentary *Sex and the Holy City*, Cardinal

Alfonzo Lopez Trujillo, the pope's family-issues maven, revealed that the church now opposes condoms *because they are not only immoral but also—news flash!—ineffective.* The latex, you see, allegedly contains many long-overlooked, minute "holes" through which HIV can pass (see Comic Relief, page 19). The media pounced on the controversy and followed up with reports that the Vatican was spreading the pseudo-scientific gospel. The archbishop of Nairobi, Kenya, for one, decreed, "AIDS has grown so fast because of the *availability* of condoms." Priests in four continents were even said to be sabotaging local condom distribution by warning that the latex was laced with HIV. The World Health Organization swiftly condemned the Vatican.

This story vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. World AIDS Day passed with no word from Trujillo. This spring the church will publish, in many languages, its first-ever pastoral handbook on AIDS. Say a little prayer.

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