The Pope Allows Condoms For Male Prostitutes; The United Nations Allows Executions For Gays

November 22, 2010 By Regan Hofmann

Two of yesterday's headlines stopped me cold:

"Pope Says Condoms to Stop AIDS May Be Acceptable"

and

"UN General Assembly Votes to Allow Gays to be Executed Without Cause"

I rubbed my eyes. Reread the headlines. Then rubbed my eyes some more. I wasn't imagining things.

The first piece of news isn't nearly as rosy as the headline suggests. The Pope is not widely endorsing condoms for Catholics (or anyone else); he is merely allowing that when they are used by, for example, male prostitutes, the choice to use them mitigates the "immorality" of the situation. He claims that used thus, they can be considered a first step in the right direction; an example of relative morality. The Pope himself appears to be moving in the right direction by allowing that condom can be used in certain circumstances. But the truth is he is not actually budging on a position that leads millions of Catholics to make the dangerous choice between protecting themselves and others from disease and staying true to their faith.

Last year, Pope Benedict stirred controversy when he suggested that condom use could hasten the spread of AIDS. He said the HIV pandemic was "a tragedy that cannot be overcome by money alone, that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which even aggravates the problem." Then, his PR spin team at the Vatican softened the official statement to suggest that the Pope said "condoms 'risk' aggravating the problem." There was no clear justification for how or why that might be true.

Ever since, many have clamored for the papal leader to clarify--and rethink--his stance on the laying on of the latex.

Yesterday, a series of articles in the global press (prompted by the impending release of "Light of the World: The Pope, The Church and The Signs of the Times," a book-length set of interviews with the Pope conducted by Peter Seewald) described the Pope's revised stance on condom use.

According to the New York Times, "Pope Benedict XVI said that condom use can be justified in

some cases [such as for male prostitutes] to help stop the spread of AIDS...the Pope made it clear that he considered the use of condoms a last resort and not a way to prevent conception." The article said "The Roman Catholic Church does not see condoms as 'a real or moral solution' and that they are 'not really the way to deal with the evil of H.I.V. infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality'."

The London Telegraph's coverage of the Pope's comments claimed "while [the Pope] restated the Catholic Church's staunch objections to contraception because it believes that it interferes with the creation of life, he argued that using a condom to preserve life and avoid death could be a responsible act--even outside marriage" and "[the Pope] stressed that abstinence was the best policy in fighting the disease but in some circumstances it was better for a condom to be used if it protected human life."

It is a critical that the Pope is speaking out on the subject for the first time and for first time allowing that there are circumstances that necessitate condom use. But it is a far cry from freeing all Catholics to protect themselves while keeping the faith.

The second piece of news is every bit as horrific as it appears. Language that had existed to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people from being executed for no other reason than their sexual orientation has been removed from a UN resolution. The blog thenewcivilrightsmovement.com reported that, "the UN General Assembly's Third Committee on Social, Cultural and Humanitarian issues removed "sexual orientation" from a resolution addressing extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions this past week in a vote that was overwhelming represented by a majority of African, Middle East and Caribbean nations."

These are nations, mind you, that have the highest incidence of gay hate crimes.

In short, while the resolution aims to reduce the incidence of extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in general (including for people who are gay) the removal of the specific reference to sexual orientation could lead some to interpret that it is now okay to kill someone merely because they are gay.

Regardless of where you sit on issues of sexual orientation, it should be alarming that the UN is sanctioning death for people who are gay. Because it's not a far jump from that to say, killing someone because they are a woman, or killing someone because they hold different beliefs. It's a terrifying precedent. And it empowers some of the most dangerous governments in the world to commit crimes against humanity.

The U.K. gay rights and human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell said of the UN vote:

"This is a shameful day in United Nations history. It gives a de facto green light to the on-going murder of LGBT people by homophobic regimes, death squads and vigilantes. They will take comfort from the fact that the UN does not endorse the protection of LGBT people against hate-motivated murder.

"The UN vote is in direct defiance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees equal treatment, non-discrimination and the right to life. What is the point of the UN if it refuses to uphold its own humanitarian values and declarations?

"This vote is partly the result of a disturbing homophobic alliance between mostly African and Arab

states, often inspired by religious fundamentalism. LGBT people in these countries frequently suffer severe persecution."

Both the Pope and the UN have the power to defend people against crimes of humanity. And they are not doing so to the full extent of their powers. The Pope could endorse condoms for all and the UN could ensure that sexual orientation could not be grounds for murder.

As someone raised Catholic, I am well aware of the reasons the Catholic Church uses to defend their anti-condom stance. Basically, condoms, because they prevent conception, interfere with "God's plan." It is not my place to criticize Catholic doctrine. People should be free to believe what they believe and to practice any faith they choose without prosecution.

However, the doctrine of the Catholic Church was established well before AIDS tore across the world with its seemingly unstoppable vengeance putting 25 million people six feet under and affecting 33.1 million more. And rendering 15 million children orphans. As the first sexually transmitted infection with the power to kill on such scale, AIDS introduced a real conundrum for leaders of the Catholic Church who must choose to honor doctrine, or evolve with the times to spare lives.

I believe the leadership of any faith has a responsibility to the health and longevity of its followers and that when the world faces new challenges, they should have the authority and flexibility to react. At what point, I ask, is a religious leader like the Pope allowed, even obligated, to consider revision of church doctrine in the name of saving millions of people?

The Church's answer to the "What is a good Catholic to do in an AIDS-ridden world since we can't use condoms?" is, plain and simple, abstinence. Or abstinence until marriage.

I would be the first one to champion abstinence or abstinence until marriage if either or both seemed to be achievable for many people. But the reality is that no matter what is taught in schools or preached from the pulpit, people don't seem to be able to stop having sex. And abstinence obviously only works as a form of prevention if people abstain from sex. In fact, teaching abstinence until marriage sex education has led many American teens to have only oral and anal sex in order to preserve their "virginity"--a misunderstanding of the definition of abstinence that has led to the fact that nearly 30% of all new HIV infections in the U.S. are in people ages 15-29.

As for people's ability to abide abstinence, I point to the recent glut of sexual abuse cases within the Catholic Church itself. If the highest ranking leaders of the Catholic Church cannot seem to stop having sex, how can they suggest that others can, or should? I realize that there are people who can abstain from sex altogether (including many leaders of the Catholic Church), or who can abstain from sex until marriage and then stay 100% faithful for the rest of their lives, but given that history and facts prove that these folks are in the minority, how can the Catholic Church abandon the rest of its other believers? And given the infidelity rates of married couples worldwide, marriage itself is no guarantee that people will remain faithful; in fact being married (as married people are far less likely to use condoms, particularly if they are Catholic) has become one of today's high-risk activities for contracting HIV.

Does being a good Catholic today mean that one must risk one's life in order to honor God?

Has the world evolved so little that we can still condone letting millions die in the name of religious doctrine and refuse to protect people against hate crimes based on their sexual orientation all because of

antiquated views on sex and sexuality?

I'm no theologian, but isn't there a way for people of all beliefs to justify protecting others against sickness and death regardless of what they think of those people's morality or sexual orientation or beliefs? Can't we agree on the basic tenet of the protection of human life?

Sexual orientation should not be the basis for denying a person's basic right to live. And putting a piece of latex over one's penis to prevent death should not be immoral--even if it does happen to occasionally and incidentally prevent conception along the way.

In the coverage of the Pope's new comments on condom use, it is never stated explicitly that when he says "male prostitutes" he means "gay male prostitutes." I think it is implied as he is using the impossibility of conception as defense for why condom use in the case of sex between two men can represent "evolved morality." But what then would he say about a woman who had passed through menopause and can no longer conceive? Can her sex partner use a condom so they are both protected from disease?

And what about fertile female Catholics with HIV?

The London Telegraph reported that "when asked last year whether a married Catholic couple should use condoms where one of them had AIDS, Archbishop Vincent Nichols, head of the Church in England and Wales, disclosed the confusion over the issue. 'Obviously that's a sensitive point and obviously there are different views on that,' he said."

As a woman living with HIV who has been in serodiscordant relationships and faced the issue of protecting my partner I want to point out the absurdity of anti-condom thinking in particular in this case.

Those who oppose condoms do so because they say condoms can prevent the creation of life as God intended. But condomless sex between discordant heterosexual couples, especially where there is the possibility for pregnancy, can put more lives at risk for death than are prevented from being created by condom use.

And then there is the issue that not using condoms in serodiscordant sex (between straight or gay couples) in many countries can lead to prosecutions that can land people in prison. So, what should practicing Catholics with HIV do? Defy the Pope? Or risk infecting their partner and potentially face imprisonment? Risk conceiving children who could be born with HIV (though with treatment, women who have HIV can minimize the risk of HIV transmission to their babies to less than two percent). Should they remain abstinent? For the rest of their lives?

I am a woman, raised Catholic, who contracted HIV. When that happened, I had a choice. Risk the lives of others, and risk imprisonment for that choice, or choose to use condoms and protect people and myself. I had to relinquish my faith in order not to kill. To me, it was an easy choice. I didn't want to follow a God who asked me to threaten the lives of others to prove my faith.

I suppose I could have chosen to never have sex again and commit my life faithfully to God.

But I choose not to practice a faith that demands my dedication to a God who would take away my sexuality.

Perhaps that makes me a sinner, immoral or destined to eternity in a fiery pit. But if that turns out to be the case, I won't take the blood of others with me to my eternal hell.

As the Pope himself pointed out, money alone can't stop AIDS. We need a modern, revised view of morality that reflects the reality of today's biological landscape. A landscape that includes a pandemic that is sexually transmitted. We need money, education, antiretroviral drugs, protection against the stigmatization, discrimination and criminalization of people with HIV so people aren't afraid to get tested and linked to medical care that can save their lives and reduce the chance that they can spread the virus. And we need condoms, too.

Because condoms can stop the spread of HIV/AIDS--not only between gay male prostitutes and their sex partners but also between good, bible-abiding heterosexual Catholics.

Like the male prostitute who uses a condom and thus gets one step closer to "morality" in the Pope's eyes, the Pope himself takes a first step towards great morality with his revised stance on condom use. As a result of his new stance, lives may be saved.

I commend the Pope for his modern and open-minded thinking on the issue. But I would encourage him to go all the way there. If he were to say that widespread condom use should not be condemned and further, that condoms save lives even as the prevent the formation of life, he could have a huge impact on the stigma surrounding HIV and protect the lives of countless Catholics and people of all faiths.

Ironically, the conservative political and spiritual leaders who think they are protecting people with their current views are actually putting people in harm's way. It is only when we stop condemning people over the issues of sex, sexuality and sexual orientation in the name of God that we will make the world a safer place for us all.

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