

National/International Report

Buffalo's bishop disagrees with distribution of condoms

Vatican editorial calls 'safe sex' a superficial answer to AIDS crisis

Bishop Edward Head of Buffalo strongly disagreed with a Unitarian minister who handed out condoms during a sermon on AIDS at a Unitarian Universalist church in the suburb of Amherst.

The minister, the Rev. Carl F. Titchener, handed out about 125 boxes of condoms at his Feb. 8 service to dramatize the need for measures to stop the spread of AIDS, a deadly disease associated primarily, but not exclusively, with sexually active homosexual men.

In his 30-minute sermon, Rev. Titchener said there was a need for dialogue about AIDS, but said "most of us are still squeamish" on the subject.

"It should not be necessary for me to do what we are doing this morning," he said. "But the only ways we have to stop the spread of this dreadful disease is to abstain or, if we do not abstain, to use a condom."

He said he decided to speak about AIDS after a fellow minister contracted the disease.

After Rev. Titchener's sermon, which had been widely publicized, Bishop Head responded with a press statement. The bishop said that the Catholic Church cares for those who have contracted AIDS and helps them through "health care facilities which the church has set up for the treatment of those with AIDS." He also called on the government to make available funds "for research to find a cure for this disease which is spreading rapidly."

Bishop Head also said that eradicating AIDS "involves much more than 'safe sex'" and said that "people are able to exercise discipline and responsibility in their lives."

"Sexual activity has full meaning only within marital relationships, when it becomes an experience of love open to life," he said. "Anything less than that makes sexual activity less than God intended it to be and therefore irresponsible. Extramarital sex does not become moral simply because it becomes safe."

European bishops are delivering a similar message to the governments of Germany, Switzerland, Scotland, Ireland and England. Because AIDS is contracted primarily

through seminal fluids or blood, those governments' proposals to control its spread have included the distribution of condoms to high-risk groups, and information campaigns that encourage the use of condoms.

In a front-page editorial February 8, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, termed such tactics superficial and absurd.

Instead of using the crisis for "a serious examination of the state to which a self-proclaimed culture has reduced human sexuality," the paper said, people try to preserve their "alleged liberty" by "distributing prophylactics freely."

One needs only "good common moral sense to understand the superficiality and absurdity of such a remedy," it said.

"If, as it seems, the spread of the disease is connected to a particular behavior," the editorial added, the only "reasonable" decision "is to act in a way that that behavior does not continue and is not spread."

The editorial said the church teachings on sexuality — which sanction sexual intercourse only within marriage — are not based on health benefits but on "obedience to the laws of God." Nor will the church cease its teachings "when — as every one of us hopes — the spread of (AIDS) is ended,"

the editorial said.

The editorial followed a Feb. 6 announcement by Vatican Radio that the Swiss bishops' conference had criticized that country's anti-AIDS campaign for being "insufficient and ambiguous."

The information campaign — which encourages the use of condoms — is "legitimate and necessary," the bishops' statement said, but by encouraging activity "that does not conform to human dignity," the campaign may be a danger to the faithful.

(Story compiled from NC reports from Buffalo, N.Y., and the Vatican.)

Dispute continues over federal family planning funds

By Liz Schevtchuk

Washington (NC) — Government funds cannot be used for abortion by federally assisted family planning groups, but that doesn't mean such organizations must be denied federal funds for non-abortion efforts, Secretary of Health and Human Services Otis R. Bowen said February 5.

In a memorandum Bowen told federal administrators to enforce the law, adding, "let me emphasize that no family planning program of which abortion or abortion-related activities are a part can be eligible for Title X funds."

He said he wanted to end the "considerable confusion" over the Title X family planning funding after an effort by a lower-echelon official to cut off support to Planned Parenthood because of its pro-abortion views.

Bowen said his instruction was "intended to clarify this matter." But pro-life and Planned Parenthood groups soon differed on the meaning of the secretary's directive.

The Bowen memo "if properly enforced will deny federal funds to pro-abortion groups such as Planned Parenthood," Douglas Johnson, legislative director of the National Right to Life Committee, said February 6.

Johnson later added that "Bowen's new memo leaves several key questions unanswered, but it does contain some important statements. These strong statements and certain other passages in the memo can be

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Secretary of Health and Human Services

read to buttress the position taken by Jo Ann Gasper."

William Hamilton, director of the Planned Parenthood office in Washington, said the memo seemed to uphold the status quo under which Planned Parenthood receives federal family planning funds.

The issue arose on January 21 when Gasper, deputy assistant secretary for population affairs, tried to refuse further federal funding for Planned Parenthood because of the group's abortion position, which includes performing abortions in about 50 of its approximately 750 U.S. clinics.

Gasper's order was rescinded by her supervisor, Dr. Robert Windom, within 24 hours and she was reprimanded.

The controversy then ended up on Bowen's desk. Anti-abortion groups besieged the White House and the Department of Health and Human Services urging reinstatement of Gasper's policy.

"Mrs. Gasper's basic intention was one I fully share: to ensure that the legislation establishing Title X ... is scrupulously enforced by this department," Bowen told his regional administrators.

"Title X is a program of preventive family planning," the Health and Human Services secretary wrote. "From its inception in 1970, no funds were to be used in programs where abortion is a method of family planning." That mandate from the Congress has never been altered.

"In conformity with it, we find that if any organization includes abortion or abortion-related activities in a family planning

program, that program is not eligible for Title X funding," he stated.

"However, other programs of the organization — an adoption program, for example, or maternal nutrition program, or an employment training program for young mothers — not involving abortion or abortion-related activities might be eligible for various forms of federal assistance from this or other departments or agencies," he wrote.

He said his memo was meant to help regional administrators handle applications for funding and to monitor activities of existing grant recipients. The memo did not mention Planned Parenthood or any other family planning organization by name.

He also repeated the intent of a message to Congress by President Ronald Reagan "which will enforce the integrity of the Title X family planning program."

In that written, unpublicized message in late January, Reagan promised proposals to "prohibit federal government funds from being used to ... support, through Title X family planning grants or contracts, any organization — except a grant or contract directly administered by a state or local government — that provides abortion procedures or referral for abortion, unless the life of the mother would be endangered."

Johnson noted that some uncertainty over the administration's actions remained and that "further grass-roots action may very well be necessary." He promised his organization will offer advice on follow-up action, if warranted, "when the situation is a little clearer."

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