

# WORLD & NATION

## French report creates condom contretemps

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

ROME — In a major report on AIDS, French bishops said condom use may be a necessary but insufficient means of preventing the disease — a statement that set off a week of reaction and reflection among church and medical experts.

Theologians and bishops gave differing assessments of the French report. In Rome, one theologian called it morally ambiguous while another said it was part of a legitimate debate on a complex issue.

Leading French doctors praised the report as a welcome advance in church thinking, but the head of an Italian Catholic medical association was critical, saying condom use is morally wrong and scientifically unsafe.

The Vatican had no official comment on the document in the week following its publication Feb. 12.

The French bishops, meanwhile, stressed that the report did not contradict church teaching. They noted that it encouraged greater emphasis on abstinence from sexual relations, fidelity in marriage and sex education programs.

They said too much media attention was focused on condoms, ignoring much of the social and pastoral advice contained in the 235-page document. Titled, "AIDS: Society in Question," it was drafted by the Social Commission of the French bishops' conference after two years of consultation with theologians, doctors and AIDS associations.

The report said that in the case of adults who cannot abstain from sexual activity and who are in danger of contracting AIDS, a condom could be used to avoid infection.

It noted that public health officials and "many competent doctors affirm that a good-quality condom is currently the only method of prevention. In this respect, it is necessary."

The document, however, said the condom is insufficient in removing all risk of AIDS infection and fails to address the root causes of the disease's spread. The report opposed advocating condoms for adolescents, saying that makes it harder for youths to understand their sexual

identity and makes it easier for them to give in to their impulses.

Bishop Albert Rouet of Poitiers, president of the Social Commission, said the document reiterates what several French bishops have already said.

"When an adult, as mature as one can be in this domain, considers he can't do without sexual relations and there is a danger, it's better he use that condom. That's obvious," he said in a French radio interview.

The report said that because the church was suspected of being totally opposed to the use of condoms, it was accused of working "in favor of death." In fact, it said, the church's position is more nuanced.

Like many church leaders who commented on the text, the report drew a sharp distinction between those who are honestly seeking protection against a grave risk and those who are propagandizing for sexual irresponsibility.

Pope John Paul II's in-house theologian, French Dominican Father Georges Cottier, said the use of condoms to prevent AIDS was a legitimate topic for theological debate. But he warned against making a myth of the condom's effectiveness in preventing disease, which is less than 100 percent.

He also said some pro-condom campaigns are in effect campaigns for sexual permissiveness, straying from what they "ought to be — campaigns of pure information and, at most, distribution to stricken sectors that have no defense" against AIDS.

Another moral theologian who frequently writes for the Vatican newspaper, Italian Father Gino Concetti, said the French bishops' position was ambiguous. He said there was a difference in meaning between what is necessary and what is "morally legitimate."

He said the Vatican could not accept the proposition that the use of condoms was a moral good without contradicting its entire teaching on the family and sexual relations. What the French bishops were saying, he said, was that condom use could be tolerated by the church in certain circumstances, but it could not be morally licit.



Reuters/CNS

## Hoping for peace

A young girl takes part in trade union peace rally Feb. 16 at a Belfast city hall in Northern Ireland. A number of such rallies were held despite two recent bombings in London that have been linked to the Irish Republican Army.

Dutch Cardinal Adrianus Simonis, commenting on the French report, said he opposed the indiscriminate promotion of condoms in anti-AIDS campaigns, because he thought it encouraged sexual promiscuity.

But he said that in a particular situation within marriage, for example that of a husband with AIDS and a wife uninfected with the disease, using a condom may be seen as a legitimate form of "self-defense."

In Spain, officials of the bishops' conference criticized anti-AIDS campaigns based on condoms and said their use by married Catholics goes against church teaching on procreation.

At the same time, they said condoms may be an acceptable "lesser evil" for sexually promiscuous single people.

"For those who live promiscuously and outside of Catholic norms, use of condoms can be considered tolerable, although this is not the ethical ideal," said Archbishop Fernando Sebastian of Pamplona, vice president of the bishops' conference.

"Those who do not comply with moral law should at least take the precaution to avoid infecting others," he said.

In France, Dr. Luc Montagnier, one of the people who discovered the AIDS

virus and a consultant to the French bishops on their report, said the bishops' position marked an important evolution in the church's teaching. He said most doctors agree that condoms alone are not the answer to AIDS, but feel they should not be excluded for religious reasons.

Dr. Marc Gentilini, president of the French Catholic Doctors' Committee, also praised the report as "progress" and said it cleared up ambiguities.

But Italian Dr. Domenico di Virgilio, president of the Italian Catholic Medical Association, criticized the French bishops. He said use of condoms was morally wrong and, because of its failure rate, unsafe.

An editorial in the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, called the report "better late than never." It called on the bishops to make their message heard, especially in Africa, where AIDS is widespread.

The report was published in book form and went on sale in French bookstores. It contained information about the church's mission to combat AIDS and interviews with people touched by the disease as victims or health care providers.

Contributing to this story were Agostino Bono in Rome, Barry James in Paris and Jeff Sellers in Madrid.



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