

## **AIDS, Condoms and the principle of “oikonomia”**

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It is noteworthy that at a time when many people have given up on the Church and some aspects of its moral teaching, the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of the new pope should have reignited the debate on the question of the Catholic Church and condoms. Journalists and people far removed from the Church's teaching are suddenly interested in the church, its teaching and the possible changes of the teaching in these times of transition.

As a Catholic priest I can reflect on it in many ways. The 1968 encyclical “*Humanae vitae*,” which prescribed methods surrounding procreation and its consequences still seem to curtail open debate within the Church. In *Humanae vitae*, Pope Paul VI could have followed the majority advice of his own experts, who counselled a measure of acceptance for artificial contraception. He did not and many Catholics simply ignore it.

Another fact is that our people are dying. The millions of deaths worldwide, especially in Africa, as a consequence of HIV and AIDS also include millions of Catholics. We might wish it was otherwise, and we can insist on behaviour changes according to papal teaching but it is not happening.

If we are honest, we must admit that the Church's current teaching could be considered a death sentence for people who cannot or will not go against the Church's sexual moral theology. This applies even to those who live faithfully within a marriage, but their partner does not. This is a situation which the bishops of Southern Africa recognised when they tacitly legitimated condom use, where one partner is HIV positive and the other is HIV negative.

How do we get out of this vicious cycle? Most bishops and moral theologians have learned, some the hard way to be silent and wait for an answer from Rome. I am sure that among them there is a lot of anguish as they see our people dying and still feel obliged to wait.

Many Catholics actively involved in the fields of HIV and AIDS are keeping silent, but pastorally may contradict to the Church's teaching as they are sometimes torn between allegiance towards the Church and loyalty towards the people they serve. Pseudo-scientific explanations from high-ranking Church representatives claiming that condoms are unsafe and that the virus can easily pass through them are simply not correct and do not help the situation at all.

Counting on abstention alone also has no merit in practice, only the combination of all approaches might bring an end to the spread of the virus. Accepting the teaching of the Church for the moment and just praying that development will take place is also not enough.

Which direction shall we take, the one acceptable to the Church's teaching or the one that supports the people who are on the brink of being infected?

- First we must realise that we are not dealing with saints, but with human beings. In the long-term, trying to enforce ideals that do not reach people does not work. The Church is a communion of saints and sinners and we have to serve them all.
- Next we might look to other churches and their richness of traditions, valued by our Church according to the Vatican II council.

I noted with excitement that our new pope, Benedict XVI, has stated his willingness to further develop the ecumenical results of this council. Perhaps we have a first test case here, because time is running out for millions: they are dying.

The Orthodox Church, our sister church offers us the principle of “oikonomia”. In brief we can describe oikonomia as a consequence of God’s unconditional love for every human being. The principle of oikonomia accepts that there are rules and regulation, but those can be set aside for a specific reason or a specific group of people for the sake of their well being. This does not mean the end of a rule, but an exception by accepting and highlighting the rule, determined and reasoned by the unconditional and never-ending love of God and Christ, symbolised and carried forward by the church. Oikonomia is the constant realisation of the mystery of God’s love, revealed by Jesus Christ.

Vatican II called on us to read the signs of the time. At a time of HIV/AIDS, the sign may be not to enforce greater burden and moral prescriptions on people, but giving them more unconditional love. Maybe the answer for our Church is not to fight the disease with moral arguments, but embrace the syndrome and the people infected and affected with love, a love that doesn’t stop with the provision of care for the sick and dying, but one that abandons judgment and is open to the realities of human interactions in our time. Maybe the answer lies in accepting, cherishing and highlighting a principle of our sister church.

I want to challenge our theologian to study and discuss this route. And they should do so quickly as people are dying, God’s people are dying and if we do not act, then we will fail again and again. Indeed, if we fail to act, we are in danger of getting close to what constitutes a sin.

I invite our theologians to:

- Visit a shack and hold hands with someone dying from AIDS,
- Visit a shack and speak to women who do not have control over their sexuality, for whom the Church’s teaching on sexual morality is not an option because of culture or poverty.
- Visit a woman living with an HIV-positive man and advise her, face-to-face, that they are not allowed to use a condom.
- Talk to youngsters who are sexually active from a young age (in South Africa as early as 12-13 years) and advise them not to protect themselves because of moral reasons.

I am not an academic but a simple priest. I am torn apart by what is preached and what I should preach, and what happens in our communities. I cannot stop hearing the voices of desperation and the suffering, the anxiety of my

brothers and sisters caught in between teaching and need. I wish that all we are doing would contribute, without any doubt, to stopping the spread of the virus here and now.

We need a theology of AIDS, we need to incorporate this strong and life threatening sign of the time into our existing theology. And we have to do this not from the safety of universities or a curial ivory tower, but coming from the people who suffer.

It is there where we find God and our brother Jesus, the source of our theology.

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