THE CONDOM CONUNDRUM: WHEN POPES BECOME A SOCIAL PROBLEM*

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Revised March 28, 2011

Paper for Presentation at the Meetings of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture, Arlington, Va., April 7-10, 2011, 9c, Sun. 8:30 A.M.

*Research on this study was performed during a visiting faculty appointment at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio (2007) and continued while I taught at Oakland University. Contact Dr. Kinkel, Oakland University, 522 Varner, Rochester, Michigan 48309, kinkel@oakland.edu

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I am grateful to the following for reviewing earlier drafts of the manuscript and offering helpful comments: Norma Josef, Danielle Kinkel, Jonathan Kinkel, Francis Strunk.
ABSTRACT

A certain number of major religious denominations ban the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. This paper examines how one of these denominations, the Roman Catholic church, has maintained, until recently, that no Catholic in good standing can use condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS. Using Charles Kimball’s warning signs of dysfunctional religion, this study points out the inadequacy of previous Catholic teaching as articulated by certain reform-minded Cardinals and bishops; they have argued that abstinence and fidelity are not the complete answer to the problem of AIDS. These high ranking officials (e.g., Dowling, Martini) have said that condoms must be a part of Catholic church’s AIDS prevention policy. While Pope Benedict and his predecessor have stated in the past that a condom is simply a method of birth control, pure and simple, some clerics and laity have asserted that such analysis is flawed and that the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” trumps all previous teaching and theological speculation regarding condoms and AIDS. A condom can prevent death and preserve life, they claim, and is a lesser of two evils. While publicly objecting to Pope Benedict’s teaching, these clerics have formed a de facto social movement in the church with all the true characteristics of a mechanism for social change. They have asserted that the pope was in error and must change his position on this matter. In 2006 the Vatican stated it planned to review current teaching on this issue, but three years later, with no report in sight, (2009) the pope informed the world that using condoms would only increase the spread of AIDS. Hence, no change was ordered. The medical journal Lancet objected to the pope’s statement and demanded a retraction. None was forthcoming. This paper shows how religious fundamentalism has infected the Catholic church and other religious institutions in the last three decades to the detriment of human well-being. In an abrupt change in course, Pope Benedict stated in November, 2010 that condoms could be used in certain circumstances to prevent the spread of AIDS. The teachings and procedures of the Catholic church are discussed and evaluated as to whether we can conclude that papal policy formation and its dilatory actions have been a global social problem and must be changed.

Key Words: HIV, condoms, AIDS, prevention, popes, religious ideology, social movement, social change, fundamentalism, conservative, Vatican II
Introduction

For over three decades top leaders in the Roman Catholic church have ruled out the use of condoms as a method of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. They maintained that the best way to prevent the spread of AIDS was abstinence and fidelity. This paper examines why two recent popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, rejected a safe and effective means of preventing the spread of AIDS for almost thirty years and may have caused serious harm to loyal Catholics in the process. Second we examine the rationale behind such Vatican policy on AIDS prevention; third, the objections to papal teachings are noted. Lastly, we discuss the abrupt change announced by Pope Benedict (Nov. 2010) which now allows Catholics to use condoms in certain instances to prevent AIDS and how this new teaching emerged.

Theoretical Background

Social science literature offers mixed findings regarding the possible role religion plays in causing harm to its members. The key point here is not whether some people who claim to be religious have hurt other church members, but rather this paper explores the idea that a religious denomination, by its very teachings and public statements, could directly or indirectly cause harm and even death to its own people. Durkheim in the late 19th century showed that
suicide rates varied between religious denominations, but he never claimed that any religion through its teachings directly harmed its members (Pickering and Walford, 2000). Weber (1905) outlined how the Protestant Reformation had various positive consequences for societies and their economies, but once again, we do not find in his writings any indication that he thought religion brought about harm to its members. Contemporary research (Kimball, 2002; Carroll, 2001) has uncovered instances wherein religious people have helped to bring harm to others, e.g. anti-Semitism, priest sexual abuse crisis, although these cases are instances of church members who have deviated from the religion’s fundamental teachings and beliefs, and not followed the true path of virtue. When Jim Jones (Jonestown massacre) and David Koresh (Branch Davidian Sect) led hundreds to their deaths, most informed researchers concluded these “religious” leaders were mentally deranged or deviant types who had lost their moral integrity. A polio outbreak among Amish families in Minnesota some years ago, however, proves to be a different story altogether. The Amish have a deep-rooted suspicion of vaccination due to family and religious beliefs; this tradition has probably brought harm to some Amish children and put others in the region at risk (Harris, 2005). A safe and effective means was available to prevent polio, but religious teaching and practices frowned upon the utilization of modern medicine and the role of science in family life. This is certainly one
case in which conservative religious beliefs may have unwittingly harmed members of one’s own religious community. Kimball (2002: 29) sums up the issue rather well: “Religious world views and inflexible doctrines among Christian groups have often presented serious problems in the face of scientific inquires and hypotheses.” The teaching and practice of some religious communities can and will cause harm at times. This paper explores the controversial question as to whether Catholic leaders, following a set of conservative teachings and practices, have brought serious harm and even death to their religious brothers and sisters.

Method

To study the reluctance of Catholic leaders to permit the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, this paper employs three strategies: (1) The inquiry borrows from the many insights of the Harvard Case Study Method. This approach gives teachers, students, and interested scholars the tools to analyze over time competing viewpoints found in corporations in order to determine why problems arise as well as how they might be resolved.1 The Catholic church is certainly a corporation2 filled with conflict, competition and intrigue. In the end, the AIDS-conds controversy will be

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tentatively resolved after a long period of conflict. (2) Since this study looks at a religious organization in grave crisis (Küng, 2010; Hockenos, 2011), I conduct the case study with Kimball’s two warning signs of dysfunctional religion—absolute truth claims and blind obedience—in mind; we wish to determine if these factors are present in the organization and whether they helped to exacerbate the condoms/AIDS conflict in the Catholic church. (3) Lastly, I have selected the case study method since it allows scholars to examine a crucial event (the first CDC report on AIDS, 1981) before and after its manifestation and tentatively conclude whether Catholic organizational leaders handled the problem correctly and what can be learned from the experience.

Investigation

Preliminary remarks. The first part of this inquiry naturally begins with observations. Before 1981 the Catholic Church had to deal with various issues that emerged after the Second Vatican Council. Hans Küng (2003: 24), a council expert, rightly points out in his memoirs,

that he and other theologians underestimated the power of

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2 It is a corporation in that it has received tax exempt status, appoints officers to run day to day operations, and it gives orders to subordinates that they must follow, e.g., all bishops are forbidden to ordain women priests.
conservative forces to once again take over the Vatican power structure after the council ended in 1965. Many social historians have observed that the Vatican council was a victory by moderates and progressives who sought to bring change to the Catholic church (Wilde, 2004). But ultra-conservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (d. 1979) and various ecclesiastical hardliners would stop at nothing to block meaningful change in the church. His Cardinal coat of arms read “semper idem”—always the same. He could be considered the founder of the “Catholic Party of NO.” The first post-Conciliar victory for conservatives came in 1968 when they convinced Pope Paul VI to ignore the papal birth control commission’s strong recommendation for a change of policy and join conservatives to keep the church’s absolute ban on artificial birth control with few exceptions (McClory, 1997). Moreover, from 1977 to 1978 three popes (Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II) had occupied the chair of St. Peter, and church stability was in question. The teaching regarding birth control (*Humanae Vitae*, 1968) was unpopular; many priests were resigning their posts to marry, while liberation theology became staple fare in seminary courses and church discussion groups. When the “Polish Pope” at age 58 took office in 1978, he set the stage for his long term as bishop of Rome by calling for a restoration of traditional
values. Soon the Church and the world would face a medical crisis of gigantic proportions—AIDS (acquired-immuno deficiency syndrome)—but early on the new pope and his colleagues had little to say about this major social calamity. In 1983 the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made it clear that a world-wide pandemic was raging out of control and may even have emerged undetected 20 years previously. Resources of all nations were needed to fight this deadly disease. Africa had been hit the hardest by HIV which causes AIDS, but all countries were at risk. By the end of 1985, some 22,996 cases of AIDS were diagnosed in the U.S.; 12,592 of these patients died. The emergence of this disease would bring about a major crisis in the Catholic church.

*Plan to Fight the Spread of AIDS.* Epidemiologists began to point out how the virus spreads (i.e. blood transfusions, intravenous drug use, sexual intercourse, etc.). Thus it became clear to the medical community that public policy action was needed immediately. The National Institutes of Health stated in the mid 1980s that condom usage proved extremely helpful in reducing the risk of contracting AIDS. Numerous high level studies since then have demonstrated that condoms were not foolproof, but they can make a significant

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3 [http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~bz372497/his.html](http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~bz372497/his.html); retrieved Jan. 31, 2011
difference in the fight against AIDS (CDC, 2008). Hence the general admonition from medical experts: condoms ought to be used during sex unless one is certain that her partner is not involved in high risk behavior, e.g., drugs, prostitution, etc.

Generally the Vatican said little in the 1980s regarding the AIDS crisis and its basic teaching, articulated by Pope John Paul II in 1988, centered on the two-fold plan to fight the disease: abstinence and fidelity (Ingham, 2005). The use of condoms was not acceptable. In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) and other pronouncements, Pope John Paul II declared that all forms of artificial birth control (including condoms) were “intrinsically evil” and could never be a part of the Catholic plan to fight AIDS. He was the first pope to declare that condoms were intrinsically evil, according to the late Cardinal Avery Dulles who stated this on EWTN Catholic television. The pope had joined the Catholic Party of NO. Many in the Church objected to these ideas and thus began a long debate regarding the use of condoms to counteract the spread of AIDS. The stakes were high; Catholic leaders had to determine what the proper teaching of the church should be, since lives were at stake. The papal critics we cite in this discussion were not radicals but concerned pastors and high ranking church leaders who wanted to save their flocks from danger and disease. The Vatican on the other hand would not hear of it. Kimball’s (2002: 41-99) signs of a
dysfunctional religion were evident again: absolute truth claims and blind
obedience and these principles were at high pitch in the halls of Vatican City
bureaucrats. But the winds of change were blowing in the hinter lands of
America and Africa; they called for a new response to the AIDS crisis. At first,
organizational change in the church would be slow and almost imperceptible.

*Catholics Confront Pope: Voices from the Pews.* In 1987 the U.S.
Catholic bishops’ administrative board saw fit to publish a document called
“The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response” which demonstrated pastoral
concern for the problem and suggested that information about condoms might be
included in education aimed at preventing AIDS. “We recognize that public
educational programs addressed to a wide audience will reflect the fact that some
people will not act as they can and should; that they will not refrain from the type
of sexual or drug-abuse behavior that can transmit AIDS. In such situations,
educational efforts, if grounded in the broader moral vision outlined above, could
include accurate information about prophylactic devices or other practices
proposed by some medical experts as potential means of preventing AIDS.”

These occasional statements by U.S. Bishops give pastors and Catholic leaders
insights about what they should do in a crisis situation. Cardinal Ratzinger,

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‘prophylactic devices’ and not ‘condoms.’
prefect of the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (later elected Pope Benedict XVI), chided the American bishops “for having issued their earlier [sic] statement without consulting Rome and warned against the appearance of condoning immoral practices” (Steinfels, 1988). Battle lines were drawn. The Roman Catholic church’s centralized administration asserted that the way to fight AIDS would be through abstinence and fidelity, not condoms. The American bishops had moved in a direction that Rome was not willing to go. Nonetheless, in 1988, the French joined the Americans when Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger advocated the use of condoms for those who tested positive for AIDS.\footnote{\textit{L.A. Times}, December 10, 1988.}

With Pope John Paul II in charismatic control and Cardinal Ratzinger pilloring theological dissidents, the church’s general policy regarding the use of condoms to fight the spread of AIDS remained relatively unchallenged by Cardinals and bishops. But by 2001 UNAids reported that 33 million people were infected by HIV/AIDS worldwide and Catholic clergymen took note. The church’s official policy was deemed inadequate.

One of the first bishops to question the Vatican’s stand on condoms/AIDS in the new millennium was Bishop Kevin Dowling of
Rustenburg, South Africa. In 2001 he argued that the use of a condom can be seen not as a means of preventing life (birth control), but rather as a means of stopping the transmission of death to another person. For this action he was rebuked at least twice by the South African papal nuncio because he was not following Vatican policy.

In order to reiterate the church’s stand on condoms, a prominent member of the Roman Curia, Cardinal Alfonso Trujillo, declared that the use of condoms is morally wrong (Ivereigh, 2011). As President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Family, he certainly had the support of the pope in stating without reservation in 2003 that the church’s ban on condoms was absolute. The use of condoms to prevent AIDS was therefore unacceptable, he said. In seeking to emphasize his point, Trujillo claimed that

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the AIDS virus could pass through the latex condom and thus it offered little or no protection against the virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) and numerous scientists declared this statement to be totally false and asked the Vatican to withdraw it immediately. Catherine Hankins, chief scientific advisor to UNAids, responded that Vatican statements “are totally incorrect. Latex condoms are impermeable. They do prevent HIV transmission.”

Nevertheless, Rome’s leaders remained steadfast in their position. The campaign against condoms had reached a new level ecclesiastical spin. The cardinal ignored well-known facts to promote church doctrine and never admitted he was wrong. Church skirmishes with science and the modern world are well known: the Galileo controversy, the ancient view that usury is a grave sin, the theory of evolution, etc. As Trujillo’s comments suggest, the Catholic church and its Vatican officials continue their anti-modern ideology; they maintain disingenuous views of reality, while simultaneously ignoring the possibility that loyal Catholics could very well suffer and die as a result of such misrepresentations. Trujillo died in 2008 and so we will never know why he took such an erroneous position.

Approximately one year later, in 2004, the general secretary from

7 Quoted in BBC NEWS October 9, 2003; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3176982.stm; of course, nothing human is perfect; condoms prove to be 2% defective according to U.S. studies.
Spain’s Conference of Catholic Bishops argued that there should be a place in church moral theology for the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS (Ivereigh, 2011). This is the responsible thing to do, he said. Opposition to Vatican policy was duly noted and Rome quickly applied pressure to squelch dissent. The full body of Spain’s conference of Bishops rejected the ideas of this small reformist group and sided with the pope. The bishops said that the “use of contraceptives implies immoral sexual behavior.” They went on to explain that it is “not true that the church has changed its doctrine on condoms,” adding, "it's impossible to advise the use of condoms" under Catholic doctrine.8 By this time it was evident that a church social movement was beginning to take shape. All was not well in the papal palace and many outside Vatican city felt that a policy change might be appropriate. Thus, opposition forces took a crucial step toward church reform: they went public and drew media attention. All the elements needed for a strong social movement were beginning to fall into place, at least according to one leading social change theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977: 1214). These pioneers of

social theory bring to bear classic insights that have had lasting influence: they argued that a social movement needs strong and powerful leaders to confront the status quo. They must mobilize the target population; there must be coalescence of individual groups working for change; the media will become useful in communicating key ideas. The case study method has uncovered a key component of church reform.

A few months after the declaration by Spain’s conference of bishops, Felipe Arizmendi, bishop of San Cristobal, Mexico, presented his ideas to the press. In late 2004 he said that condom use to prevent AIDS was a lesser evil when compared to the spread of AIDS, and that people have an obligation not to infect others. Then, in a surprise move, the reformists gained coalescence when Cardinal Georges Cottier, the theologian to the pontifical household in Rome, joined the progressives and stated that change was needed. The movement for change gained momentum when he joined the dissidents to say that church policy must be revised. Note, there clearly was a church policy at this time, and bishops asked that it be changed. Cottier told the Italian press in February 2005, that condoms could be used by a married couple, in his view,
but only for the purpose of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Thus, those at the highest level of the Roman Catholic church bureaucracy were voicing their opposition to papal teaching. These bishops followed a long line of Catholic scholars, namely, those who maintain that the pope and legitimate councils teach authentic church doctrine, unless it is withdrawn or rejected by subsequent popes or councils. Hence, when conflict arises, bishops must ask the pope to reconsider his ideas in light of their pastoral insights. St. Augustine, 5th century Bishop of Hippo, provided a similar service to the church when he and the North African bishops confronted Pope Zosimus about his support of Pelagius, a heretic according to the Council of Carthage (412 CE). The bishop of Rome eventually backed down from his previous stand and condemned Pelagianism. Augustine and his colleagues saved the church from heresy (Chadwick, 1993: 231). But history records that no one ever died of Pelagianism. AIDS is a different matter and it was no surprise, however, to learn that just before he died of complications from Parkinson’s disease, Pope John Paul II urged abstinence and fidelity to reduce the spread of AIDS; he had again rejected the use of condoms to prevent AIDS. Fifteen years of criticism and confrontation had little effect on this authoritarian pope. It is worth noting

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that one of the side effects of Parkinson’s is rigid thinking.\footnote{http://www.bu.edu/phylogeny/publications/Dopamine%20and%20sleep%20from%20S&H.pdf; retrieved Feb. 22, 2011.} Nevertheless, the strength of the pope’s claim to absolute truth and blind obedience was beginning to erode. Many church officials were questioning its validity and opposition forces were growing. Not all bishops were willing to follow the papal call to arms and affirm traditional values.

With the death of John Paul II in 2005 and the election of Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), some leaders in the Catholic church and many in the scientific community were looking for a change in Catholic policy. AIDS workers were hopeful that “there may be room for maneuver when it comes to the new Pope’s position on condom use” (Butler, 2005). Many Catholics within the church had similar views. Yet, in a June 2005 speech to African bishops, the new pope stated that the “spread of HIV and AIDS in Africa should be tackled through fidelity and abstinence and not by condoms.”\footnote{http://www.bu.edu/phylogeny/publications/Dopamine%20and%20sleep%20from%20S&H.pdf; retrieved Feb. 22, 2011.} There was nothing new here; he was following the line of the previous administration. But many found this stance hard to fathom since African Health Studies revealed
that in 2005, 30.2 percent of pregnant women were living with HIV. More had to be done to prevent the spread of AIDS, according to church reformers. The pope had officially joined the “Catholic Party of NO” in his speech to African bishops.

Nonetheless, the voices of opposition around the world grew louder. Their tactics were clear: speak out and use the media to let Vatican officials know they were on the wrong track. In the Fall of 2005 Bishop Kevin Dowling of South Africa once again asked the Vatican to change its stand on the use of condoms to prevent AIDS. He stated that the church ban on the use of condoms to prevent AIDS was morally unacceptable.

Not to be outdone in theological insight, Cardinal Javier Barragán, then head of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers, weighed in, and it became clear that the social movement (defined above) for change in the church was now in high gear. It is hard to believe that

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someone was not orchestrating these media events. In 2006 Barragán stated condoms could be used in certain circumstances, such as “when a woman cannot refuse her HIV-positive husband’s sexual advances.” Several other bishops and cardinals maintained that one must use a condom if he/she has AIDS in order to obey the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Deut 5:17). The laity quickly joined forces with the bishops. Marcella Alsan (2006: 31), a woman physician who has worked extensively in African Catholic hospitals, wrote that the church’s opposition to the use of condoms “may mean not only untold human suffering, but the loss of millions of human lives.” Similarly, Nicholas Kristof (2005) asserted that “the Vatican’s ban on condoms has cost many hundreds of thousands of lives from AIDS.” Nevertheless, the institutional Catholic church maintained its traditional moral stand and many pointed out that this rigid stance was killing people. Surprisingly, the Vatican blinked.

The tipping point in the debate came in April 2006, when 79-year-old Cardinal Carlo Martini, retired Archbishop of Milan, entered the fray. In an interview with the Italian magazine *l’Espresso* he stated that the Vatican should allow the use of condoms for married couples if one partner is infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. It is a “lesser evil,” he said. The key point that apparently

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caught the Vatican’s attention was the well-publicized report that many monogamous Catholic married women were being infected with AIDS by their promiscuous husbands. Thus, women should be allowed to protect themselves from HIV and not be forced to have unprotected sex with their husbands—an act that ultimately could leave their children orphans. Bishops were now using the argument of self-defense to push for a new church policy. Within a week of Martini’s remarks, the Vatican stated that it was preparing a document on the question of condoms and AIDS, and that it would be released soon. Austen Ivereigh (2011), writing for the Catholic journal *The Tablet*, reported that in April 2006, Cardinal Barragán invited moral theologians and other scholars to submit papers to his council on “the use of condoms by those with AIDS.” Barragán went on to say that “my council is studying this attentively with scientists and theologians expressly charged with preparing a document on the subject, which will be made public soon….”  

Three years passed and church officials failed to issue a document to clarify the AIDS/condom dilemma. Ivereigh (2011) states that he was told in 2008 that the final document was shelved because the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) and others felt that there was just no way to communicate about this
issue without being misinterpreted. There were no more voices of dissent after the study commenced since it appears no bishop will oppose a pope’s teachings publicly while he and his special committee reviews the issue in question. The Vatican failed to respond effectively to a crucial social problem and many AIDS patients died while others acquired the disease during this period of indecision. This is not to say that Catholics stood by and did nothing. Catholic organizations mercifully provide about 25 percent of the care AIDS victims receive worldwide (Alsan, 2006).

In March, 2009, Benedict broke his three years of silence and said that there would be no change in Catholic policy. No special Vatican study was ever released. Ironically, he made this announcement to journalists while flying to Africa—a continent devastated by HIV/AIDS. During this first trip to Africa, he said in response to a question about the church’s opposition to the use of condoms that AIDS “cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, they increase the problem.” This comment so enraged the health care community that the editors of Europe’s top medical journal *Lancet* demanded a retraction, since the vast majority of scientific studies demonstrate that the proper use of condoms reduces the likelihood of transmitting sexually

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transmitted diseases, including AIDS. *Lancet* (2009: 1054) editors wrote:

“Whether the pope's error was due to ignorance or a deliberate attempt to manipulate science to support Catholic ideology is unclear…. When any influential person, be it a religious or political leader, makes a false scientific statement that could be devastating to the health of millions of people, they should retract or correct the public record. Anything less from Pope Benedict would be an immense disservice to the public and health advocates, including many thousands of Catholics who work tirelessly to try and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS worldwide.” Neither the pope nor any Vatican official offered a retraction. Later on, in a 2010 statement to journalist Peter Seewald, Pope Benedict complained that he was misunderstood by the media. “In my remarks [March 17, 2009] I was not making a general statement about the condom issue, but merely said…that we cannot solve the problem by distributing condoms” (2010:118). This appears to be a strange parsing of words since the key issue raised by papal critics since 2000 had always been the following: will you allow Catholics to use condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS? No responsible scholar has ever suggested that 1) simply distributing condoms in the town square would solve the AIDS problem 2) nor were clerics within his own church saying that the church should distribute condoms to parishioners at church services. Nonetheless, many conservative Catholics defend the pope by saying
he is opposed to the “distribution of condoms” as a cure all. They seem to be implying that the pope had a point. No published medical scientist has ever subscribed to the idea that condoms are a cure all. Condoms are just one means in the medical tool box for preventing AIDS. It is an important one but not the proverbial silver bullet. This debate went on in 2009 and part of 2010. Then a remarkable change occurred in Pope Benedict’s thinking after five years of defending previous church teaching.

Pope has New Insight on Condoms. To the surprise of many Vatican observers, Pope Benedict presented a new twist on the Catholic/Condoms/AIDS debate in his new book, *Light of the World* (2010). During six days of taped conversations (1 hour each day) with journalist Peter Seewald in the summer of 2010, the pope was asked, among other things, about his stand on the use of condoms to fight AIDS. One would expect him to say, following previous statements, that fidelity and abstinence are the key ways Catholics can prevent AIDS, and not through the use of condoms. Instead, after decades of saying ‘no’ to condoms for AIDS prevention (recall his statement about the U.S. Bishops’ document in 1987), he said that in certain circumstances, it would be morally advisable to use a condom to prevent the spread of AIDS. Pope Benedict said: "There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male
prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility” (2010: 119). The pope was clearly commending the hypothetical male prostitute for using a condom in this situation; the man was being morally responsible up to a point. Later on, Peter Seewald followed with the question: "Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?" The Pope answered: "She of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality”(2010: 119). Lest anyone think that the pope was caught off guard by an unfriendly journalist’s questioning, Seewald states in the book’s preface: “In authorizing the text, the pope did not change the spoken word, and made only small corrections where he considered greater factual precision necessary” (2010: xix). In short, we must conclude the words of Benedict were carefully crafted to present his true ideas as of November, 2010. A barrage of media comments followed the publication of key parts of the pope’s new book in the Vatican’s official newspaper L’Osservatore Romano(Nov. 20, 2010) and elsewhere. James Martin, S.J. of America magazine offered these initial observations. He said that the pope’s remarks were certainly a departure from previous teaching, an exception where there had never been an exception before.
"While some bishops and archbishops have spoken in this way, the pope has never affirmed this," Martin said. “And it's interesting that he uses as an example someone who is trying to act morally to someone else by not passing on an infection, which was always the stance of those people who favored condoms in cases of HIV and AIDS. So it does mark a departure."\(^{18}\)

Georgetown University scholar, Fr. Thomas Reese took a similar view, but points out that these papal comments certainly mean that the Catholic church no longer espouses the view that condoms are intrinsically evil; he says the “pope’s new statement blasts that idea out of the water” (Reese, 2010). Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, subsequently clarified the pope’s remarks and stated that the pope’s intention was not to distinguish between male or female prostitutes. Rather, he said: “If it is a man, a woman or a transsexual who does it [uses a condom], we are always at the same point, which is the first step in responsibly avoiding passing on a grave risk to the other” (Pullella, 2010).

Of course, there were some Catholics who did not appreciate the pope’s new stance on condoms and AIDS, even though numerous bishops and Cardinals asked for a change to save lives. John Haas, who writes for Our Sunday Visitor and Legatus Magazine, had this hysterical reaction to the Pope’s new book,

Light of the World: “I told the publisher, ‘Don’t publish this; it’s going to create such a mess’” (Donadio, et al., 2010). Strange words from a conservative Catholic who advocates loyalty and obedience to the successor to St. Peter. Some priests from the Catholic right were dismayed. “I’m sorry. I love the Holy Father very much; he is a deeply holy man and has done a great deal for the church,” Father Tim Finigan, a British priest wrote, but “on this particular issue, I disagree with him” (Gibson, 2010). Obviously, major differences still exist in the Catholic church on this topic which has festered for some 25 years.

Conservative lay theologian George Weigel said that he thought it was imprudent for the pope to have this discussion in a journalistic interview (Ivereigh, 2010). Ironically, Weigel wrote the forward to the pope’s new book, Light of the World, and never mentions his reservations there. Rather he heaps praise on the book by saying Peter Seewald’s “well-crafted questions give Benedict XVI good material with which to work. But it is the remarkably lucid and precise mind of Joseph Ratzinger that makes the papal answers here sing” (2010: xi-xii). This is an odd turn of events in the so-called consistent mind of a conservative theologian. But maybe not. He made a serious error in stating that Edward Green’s study (2003) of condoms and AIDS showed no effect in reducing the spread of AIDS. Green’s research, on the contrary, demonstrates that among high risk groups such as prostitutes in Thailand and Cambodia,
condom use has a marked effect in reducing the transmission of the HIV virus (Ivereigh, 2010). For some reason, the same results have not been found thus far in Africa. Nevertheless, Green states that condoms “should have a back-up role even in the generalized epidemics of Africa. I believe condoms should be made available to everyone. It should be, and as you say, the ABC strategy: Abstain, Be faithful, use a Condom.”

The conservatives like the Holy Father (Paul VI) who wrote *Humanae Vitae*, which condemned condom use as did John Paul II, but they beg to differ with the Holy Father (Benedict) who applies previously articulated principles to new situations and problems: the crisis of AIDS.

Thirty days after the “November surprise,” Rome’s Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), issued a formal statement clarifying the pope’s remarks in his new book (Congregation, 2010). First we read that the pope’s new book is not breaking with the church’s doctrine concerning contraception. Second, the CDF wanted to tell Catholics that in the pope’s view condoms do not constitute a “real or moral solution” to the problem of AIDS. Furthermore, the document emphasizes in a third point that “it cannot be denied that anyone who uses a condom in order to diminish the risk posed to another person is intending to

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reduce the evil connected with his or her immoral activity. In this sense the Holy Father points out that the use of a condom ‘with the intention of reducing the risk of infection, can be a first step in a movement towards a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.’” In short, the CDF is affirming that the hypothetical male prostitute is doing the correct thing in using a condom to prevent the spread of AIDS. Lastly, the CDF text notes that the “Church teaches that prostitution is immoral and should be shunned. However, those involved in prostitution who are HIV positive and who seek to diminish the risk of contagion by the use of a condom may be taking the first step in respecting the life of another, even if the evil of prostitution remains in all its gravity.” In conclusion, the CDF is stating, with the pope, that in certain circumstances, the utilization of condoms can be a positive approach to the prevention of AIDS. We might add that anyone whose actions reduce evil is to be commended, according to Benedict. The CDF document clarifies what the pope said during interviews with Seewald, namely, that in some circumstances the use of condoms to prevent a deadly disease is morally commendable because it reduces the possible harm to another human being by not exposing them to the risk of AIDS. That is not a trivial matter; it is a move forward for the individual and the church. Ivereigh (2010) comments on the new teaching of Benedict this way:

The breakthrough is the Pope’s mention of a condom as a positive first step – impossible were it “intrinsically evil”. It is a rejection of the misuse of church teaching by self-appointed
guardians of orthodoxy. There is no doubt what he meant, and he has articulated the mind of the Church. Agencies on the front line can breathe more easily now.

Discussion of Findings

This case study has shown that the Catholic church has moved from a position that condoms are intrinsically evil and can never be morally justified, to a more refined and sophisticated theological approach whereby Catholics in certain circumstances can now use condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS (sexual ethics v. medical ethics). Sexual ethics deals with norms about premarital sex, sex within marriage, and other important values and concerns. Medical ethics, on the other hand, aims at directing proper human interventions toward, prevention, healing and saving lives. It is clear that the pope has distanced himself from those who would challenge the sexual ethics doctrine of Humanae Vitae, namely, that condoms cannot be used to prevent conception. The traditional doctrine rings clear: abstinence before marriage and sexual intercourse only within marriage, but no use of artificial birth control. That is the current Catholic bare bones teaching about sexual ethics. With the emergence of the AIDS crisis, the church has had to dust off its textbooks on
medical ethics, with the help of cardinals and bishops, and Benedict has come
to the conclusion (rather late) that the absolute ban on condoms is not tenable.
He broke with John Paul II on this issue as did many cardinals, e.g., Martini,
Barragán. When are condoms not contraceptives? That question was bandied
about for a number of years by church reformers and when Pope Benedict used
the example of a male prostitute using a condom in his new book, he was
breaking new ground. Seeing such action in a positive light, the pope draws ever
closer to the medical ethics conclusion: it is morally acceptable for a person
who has AIDS to use a condom to prevent the transmission of the deadly disease
of AIDS to another human being. From a medical ethics point of view condoms
here are a good thing. Concern for causing a person to become gravely ill and
die, trumps all discussions of sexual ethics which play an important but
subordinate role in the disease prevention model, according to the new rules of
Benedict. This is a breakthrough for Catholics and will save lives, according to
James Martin and others. It is Christian action in pursuit of the greater good.
Here is the timeline wherein the Catholic church through its principal leader,
Pope Benedict, came to the conclusion that condoms can be used to prevent the
spread of AIDS (see Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline for Church teaching on condom usage to prevent AIDS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Spokesperson(s)</th>
<th>Should Condoms be used?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Person/Position</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>U.S. Bishops</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Cardinal Lustiger</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>John Paul II</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Bishop Dowling(1)</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Cardinal Trujillo</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Spain’s Bishops</td>
<td>No*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Bishop Arizmendi</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Cardinal Javier Barragán</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Cardinal Cottier</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Pope Benedict XVI</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Bishop Dowling (2)</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Cardinal Javier Barragán</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Dr. Marcella Alsan</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Cardinal Martini</td>
<td>Yes, change policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Pope Benedict XVI</td>
<td>Timeout; call for a study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Pope Benedict XVI</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Pope Benedict XVI</td>
<td>Yes, in some circumstances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some asked for a change in policy but that intervention failed.

In reviewing the long period of debate over condoms/AIDS, one has to conclude that the church has shown itself to be very slow in understanding the nature and scope of numerous modern social issues, e.g., HIV/AIDS, the priest sexual abuse crisis, women priests in the church, priest shortage, etc. Its social teachings and views on family morality are not easily adjusted to changing times because of its centralized governance structure and the dominance of the ultra-conservative brand of Catholic theology at the highest levels of Roman Catholic bureaucracy. Church authorities tend to overreach in order to preserve past teachings and craft church policy without regard to human needs. Such was not the case in the early Christian church. The Council of Jerusalem (50 C.E.), Council of Nicaea and Arian heresy (325 C.E.), Confrontation of Augustine and
the Donatists (411 CE), Pope Cornelius’ policies toward (ca. 251 C.E.) “lapsed” Christians versus hardliners like Novatian and others—all show a moderating, centrist theology at work in church decision making (Chadwick, 1993: 223). Rigorists in the early church lost numerous battles to centrists and saved the church from serious error while spurring growth. The first response of most Vatican officials today is to assert traditional teachings and reject new ideas that would require change. The Church in Rome is prejudiced in the strictest sense of the word; that is, it pre-judges most new ideas and then rejects them because they do not fit its traditional conservative view of reality. This causes serious harm to Catholics around the world but this does not seem to faze the church power brokers since their focus is defending an ideology, not the fundamental truths that come to the Christian faith from the apostles. Nothing has really changed in some quarters of the Vatican in the last 45 years: recall Ottaviani’s coat of arms “semper idem”—always the same. He opposed almost every proposal for change at the Second Vatican Council. That says it all.

It is evident from this investigation that some members of the Roman Curia, e.g. Cardinal Trujillo, make things up as they go along. This, some say, is to protect Holy Mother church in time of crisis. We see that Pope Benedict did this too until he was confronted by Lancet editors. Catholic church leaders either hire bad people who give them wrong information or simply tell “white
lies” to keep old truths from unraveling. According to them, previous popes cannot be wrong since they have the Holy Spirit on their side. Leaders of this type are an embarrassment to many Roman Catholic church members around the world and cause many to leave the church—especially young people (Rondy, 2010). Their conservative policies on the AIDS-condom issue have cost many lives. Some people in the Roman Curia should be dismissed for the way they have responded to the AIDS crisis. None, of course, will lose their jobs; they are the loyal soldiers fighting the good fight against “cultural relativism.”

The church claims to be against the “culture of death” but its long-standing ban on condoms to prevent AIDS helped to contribute to millions of casualties throughout the world. The church is now part of the culture of death, which it condemns.

Despite the presence of massive church incompetence which has caused AIDS related deaths, strong leaders have emerged who refused to submit to authoritarian church policy. For the most part they presented their views in their own countries to priests, bishops, and laity to correct official church teaching. They asked the pope and curia to listen and change. These church reformers have become a true social movement for change, trying to bring the Vatican’s ultra-conservative clique to its senses for not teaching proper Catholic theology.

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20 A favorite theme of Benedict XVI.
These papal elitists were teaching false doctrine according to reformists (e.g. Dowling) while they resided in the city that claims to be a bastion of Catholic orthodoxy. That was the critique of numerous cardinals and bishops who are on the church’s payroll and have objected to the papal HIV/AIDS policy. One thing is clear: the papal U-turn presented in *Light of the World* is not a concession to liberals, but rather a correction of erroneous doctrine that has plagued the church for almost 25 years. The pope must now apologize to the Catholic community and the world. Catholic authorities can then make the proper institutional changes this crisis demands. Since he has in effect retracted a teaching that has harmed others over the years, the pope needs to set the record straight: he has put many Catholics at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS.

Continued objections by strong leaders have the following effect: they have shown the church in Rome is out of touch with applied Catholic pastoral theology. These actions demonstrate that the church needs Catholics around the world (laity and clergy) to pressure the pope and the Roman curia for change when clear facts call for action. These forces ultimately help to bring reform in a moribund and dysfunctional organization. This crisis demonstrates that there is a good model for church reform and it comes from the bottom up, not the top down, as Piven’s research has shown (2008: 1-2). Her work as a sociologist “has been about the role of protest movements in generating reforms—reforms
that ease the circumstances of people at the bottom of American society.” Many of her ideas can help global organizations like the Catholic Church understand what they have gone through and what needs to change in the future. Vatican publicist, Fr. Lombardi, acknowledged that the pope has heard the opinions of respected church leaders and theologians.\textsuperscript{21} Reform from the bottom up is working. By holding public debates instead of calling secret meetings to bare one’s soul to the pope, religious leaders initiate change and ease the world’s suffering. The process of permanent church reform may be just beginning; true reform will take time because of past mistakes.

This case study has attempted to shine a bright light on the dark caverns of Catholic church policy and its AIDS program. We found a dysfunctional religious group that failed the church in time of need. Many key leaders showed they were incapable of dealing with a major social crisis. Now we explore the reasons why such incredible mistakes have occurred and how they can be avoided in the future. For Catholics the seeds of destruction were sown after several years of renewal and change.

The early 1960s brought an influx of innovative ideas to the Roman Catholic church through the process of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Pope John XXIII wanted to bring the church up-to-date with a program he called

“aggiornamento.” He wanted to jump-start a complacent, post-war church, and his efforts paid off. First, the notion of church identity took center stage. Council Fathers decided to embrace the notion that the church is “the people of God”; this best summed up for the bishops what the church was for the 20th century. Richard McBrien argues that the Council document, *Lumen Gentium,* taught “that the church as a whole was the people of God, including both clergy and laity. This reversed centuries of virtually explicit assertion that the clergy alone were the church. Both laity and clergy, the document affirmed, shared in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ.” The idea of hierarchical structure and ecclesiastical power was secondary. The importance of religious freedom was proclaimed with the help of American, John Courtney Murray, S.J.; third, liturgical renewal became a top priority with religious services in the vernacular and community participation a mandate. Better relations with the Jewish community were made possible with the discontinuation of the Tridentine mass which was insulting to Jews (included prayers for their conversion) and an obstacle to ecumenical progress vis-à-vis Protestants.

Despite the general consensus that church reform was beginning to take hold, conservative forces would not allow the new paradigm of Vatican II to

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flourish. As council expert Hans Künig rightly points out in his memoirs, he and other scholars underestimated the power of conservative forces to once again take over the Vatican power structure after the council ended (Künig, 2003: 24). Led by ultra-conservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (d. 1979), these ecclesiastical traditionalists would stop at nothing to block meaningful change and renewal in the church. Their first post-Conciliar victory came in 1968 when they convinced Pope Paul VI to ignore the papal birth control commission recommendations for a change of policy and encouraged him to promulgate the letter *Humanae Vitae*. Church conservatives lobbied and won the battle to keep the church’s absolute ban on artificial birth control with few exceptions (McClory, 1997). This teaching and its interpretation became a major church problem when the AIDS crisis emerged. During the next 10 years Pope Paul VI faced criticism even from moderates in the church and many felt he never recovered from the rejection of progressive bishops who shunned his birth control encyclical. In 1972 the beleaguered pope remarked that the “smoke of Satan” had now entered the church. What Pope Paul was alluding to has never been fully understood.  

Conservatives took this to mean that liberal ideas were destroying orthodox church doctrine and belief. Progressives countered that misguided forces within the church were trying to turn back the teachings of the Ecumenical Council—one of the most authoritative teaching

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bodies in the Catholic church. With Paul VI’s death in 1978 two leaders emerged as papal frontrunners: Cardinals Luciani and Wojtyla. Albino Cardinal Luciani was elected pope in 1978 (John Paul I) but died after only 33 days in office. No autopsy was performed to determine the cause of death. His plans were for curial reform, a reorganization of Vatican finances, and a review of church birth control policy. Obviously he never had the opportunity to carry out any of these reform programs. The next pope, John Paul II (Cardinal Wojtyla), came from the conservative Polish branch of the Catholic church; it is well known that he supported the Church’s ban on artificial birth control even before Pope Paul’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, and may have helped write the controversial document. Thus, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Poland—long a bastion of devotional Catholicism—was elected the new pope with an apparent mandate to go slow on Vatican II reforms. By 1978 thousands of priests and nuns had resigned from ministry, dissent from church teachings was commonplace, and women’s ordination became a popular topic in seminaries, colleges, and local churches. Catholic progressives in the USA had proclaimed: stop the war (Vietnam), stop Third World oppression, stop Vatican II obstructionists. The new pope wagged his papal finger and ushered in a new phase of Catholic conservatism with simple authoritative answers to complex problems. He asked, Why should women want to be priests? Mary was not a
priest and they should want to be like her. Down with liberation theology; it
smacks of Marxism. No married priests…Jesus was not married! No artificial
birth control; it is intrinsically evil. His simple answers to complex problems
carried enormous weight. After he was shot by Ali Agca and almost killed in St.
Peter’s square, 1981, the pope became a cult figure; no one dared challenge his
teaching authority. With some historians claiming that he and Ronald Reagan
helped to bring down the Soviet Union (the evil empire), John Paul II was said to
be the closest thing to God-on-earth, according to some Catholic newspapers.
Leaders in the Catholic church joined forces with fundamentalist religious
groups and for the next 25 years it became difficult to object to any issue that the
pope supported. Absolute truth claims abounded in the corridors of Vatican city.
Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of Germany was recruited to confront any Catholic
theologian who stepped out of line. The Vatican’s new enforcer was quickly
labeled “God’s Rottweiler,” and the “Panzer Cardinal.” This German prelate
aimed his theological guns at liberal priests, laymen, and nuns alike. The
pendulum had swung to the far right. Claims to absolute truth and blind
obedience were at a high pitch. Discussion of the AIDS crisis was barely
audible in the papal apartments.

Radical conservative forces of all religious persuasions became so
prominent during this period in history that the American Academy of Arts and
Sciences funded a major study to understand the rise of fundamentalist religion and its implications for the future of America. Their 8,000 page report, published in five volumes, covers research undertaken from 1988-1993; it states, among other things, that the doctrine of fundamentalism holds that “religious authority is absolute, admitting neither criticism nor reduction” (Marty and Appleby, 1991). With a focus on sacred texts (viz., Bible) and the pronouncements of religious leaders (e.g. papal decrees, elders etc.), fundamentalism had become an anti-modern movement which adheres strictly to traditional religious teachings without compromise. Facts are often just ignored. Change to them looked like a disaster waiting to happen. “What’s wrong with the old way of doing things?” they asked. Catholic fundamentalist leaders maintain that it was their duty to defend truth against the new and radical theologies of the post-modern era. They have to be wrong. This ideology would eventually cause serious problems for the Catholic church.

The Catholic church, under the direction of John Paul II, bought into this conservative movement and made Opus Dei one of its favored sons. Founded by controversial Spanish priest Jose Escriva, who during his lifetime was a strong supporter of Fascist Francisco Franco, this secretive organization

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has now grown to its current membership of about 80,000. It was no surprise to find that Pope John Paul II made Opus Dei his own personal prelature in 1982; members were accountable only to him, not the local bishop. Defending proclaimed truth and papal pronouncements became one of the Catholic church’s chief goals. Bishops and Cardinals were promoted depending on whether they accepted the John Paul view of Catholicism.\textsuperscript{26} The official church apparatus took on a pre-Conciliar tone and flavor. Cardinals Ottaviani and Ratzinger strove for what they considered doctrinal purity and this led to a militaristic approach toward opposition forces. They could not be right. Hans Küng was stripped of his license to teach Catholic theology at Tübingen in 1979 and Edward Schillebeekx was summoned to the Vatican four times to defend his theological views. Thomas Reese was forced to resign as editor of America magazine in 2005, partly because of an essay he allowed to be published exploring the moral arguments for the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS.\textsuperscript{27} Ratzinger demanded his ouster and the Jesuits complied. Rome’s bureaucrats were obsessed with power and orthodoxy; the need for obedience to authority was paramount. Ironically, when Paul VI declared in 1970 that Cardinals who had reached 80 years of age could no longer vote in conclave for a new pope, Ottaviani went on Italian television to object to this new papal

\textsuperscript{26} See discussion of “Humanae Vitae,” by Richard McCormick in America, July 17, 1993
\textsuperscript{27} National Catholic Reporter, May 6, 2005.
directive. Indeed, the Cardinal had just turned 80. So much for the conservative moniker: always obey the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Today too many Catholic bishops share this fundamentalist ideology to some degree. Members of the Roman Curia such as Cardinal Trujillo distort medical facts to help the church save face. Ideology, not true religious insight, all too often dominates official Catholic discourse. To them the Catholic church is treated like a favorite pillow and they sleep soundly only when the feathers are conservative. Even the Catholic laity have joined in the chorus. Phyllis Schlafly, a well known right-wing Catholic ideologue, opposed C. Everett Koop’s recommendation to then President Ronald Reagan (1980-1988) that condoms and sex education should be employed to contain the AIDS epidemic. She quickly went on “television and essentially said that she would rather see her children become infected with sexually transmitted disease than to know there was such a thing as condoms” (Martin, 1997: 251). The runaway conservative freight train just keeps rolling along.

Fortunately, we have some innovative ways of analyzing these institutional shortcomings and identifying how they negate any possibility for change, solution to problems, and help for sick people. If implemented these ideas could help the church avoid mistakes in the future.
Gene Burns (1996) argues that three concepts are helpful in understanding the nature of Catholic culture, and by extension, the religious fundamentalism problem we have identified. The concepts are: ideology, core, and periphery. The discussion regarding condoms and AIDS moves to the area of **ideology** when idea systems (viz., theology) use a rigid set of conservative religious norms and values to keep social structures as they are (no change regarding condoms and AIDS, since condoms are intrinsically evil). Ideologues have to maintain the status quo because to do otherwise would be sinful. This mind-set prevents official church leaders from utilizing valuable resources to solve problems. For instance, church ideologists state that the use of condoms is sinful. But what if we consider another issue: the danger of transmitting a deadly disease? Does this change everything?

The official Catholic social structure clearly involves ideological responses and normative standards: good Catholics should obey the pope—they should not use condoms to prevent AIDS was the mantra from 1987-2010. The values presented were clear: do not interfere with the natural process of transmitting life. This conservative ideology completely ignored the other side of the coin: do not transmit death. The Cardinals and bishops who have challenged the papal position on condoms and AIDS wanted to alter the **core** of Catholic teaching on condoms. That is, they sought to change those factors that are supposedly
essential if one wants to be a Catholic in good standing. Condoms are not intrinsically evil, they said. Furthermore, papal critics tried to move the old teaching on condoms and HIV/AIDS prevention to the **periphery** of Catholic norms and assert that “Thou shalt not kill” (Deut 5:17) trumps all discussion regarding condoms and AIDS. Additionally, they said that “Thou shalt not kill” should be the **core**. That was not an easy task.

Pope Benedict embraced the Vatican position when elected in 2005, but many church leaders informed him that they opposed this ban, and thus, the theological battle raged. The pope has the power in the Catholic culture realm, according to Burns, to define what the core is and “sanction flagrant (or even subtle) dissent from that core” (1996: 41). Burns appears to overstate the power of popes vis-à-vis their senior colleagues in his article, since Benedict ultimately changed his views due, in part, to internal pressure by high-ranking bishops. He had his “Sputnik moment” and concluded he needed to alter his stance. In short, a relatively small but powerful group of bishops and cardinals were able to get the pope and his advisors to re-evaluate Catholic teaching and proclaim a new direction in church policy. They asked politely. They did not want to break from the church but rather they wanted the church to break from an old, death-producing doctrine. The old tradition banning all condom use should end, according to the church reformers and a new period of moral theology
should begin. We have new norms, they say. Catholics and non-Catholics waited to see how the Vatican would respond. Reformers challenged the pope’s claim to absolute truth and his requirement of blind obedience. Church conflict shows that at least some people in the church are thinking critically and this is a sign of religious growth, according to Kimball. He would argue the Catholic church is now showing signs that it is trying to move away from the distortions of the past.

**Summary and Conclusions**

For almost thirty years the Catholic church has struggled to understand how it should respond to the AIDS crisis. At first Pope John Paul II taught that the best way church members could prevent the spread of AIDS was through abstinence and fidelity. The use of condoms to prevent AIDS was out of the question because he held that all forms of artificial birth control were intrinsically evil. A condom was a form of birth control pure and simple. That meant that condoms could never be a part of a Catholic plan to prevent AIDS. Some bishops and Cardinals asserted that such an approach was inadequate, but the pope held his ground. After Pope John Paul’s death in 2005, Benedict XVI reiterated two decades of church policy by saying AIDS should be tackled by abstinence and fidelity, and not condoms. Both these popes became a global
social problem because they could not comprehend that condoms do not necessarily mean contraception. After five years of relentless criticism by high ranking bishops and cardinals, Benedict concluded that condoms could be used, under certain circumstances, to prevent the spread of AIDS. Condoms, therefore, are not intrinsically evil, according to Benedict, as had been taught for many years. Thus, this paper makes a number of inroads for understanding Catholic public policy at the highest level.

1) The Catholic church is slow to react to contemporary problems and this indecision makes the institution look bad, as well it should. Those in authority tend to overstate their claims to truth (intrinsically evil) and they find it hard to back off their flawed assessment of reality when competing ideas expose the weakness of their policies. It takes a long time for Catholic officials to admit they were wrong and to adjust official teaching to modern problems and issues as they arise.

2) Catholic reformers applied different principles to solve problems which conservatives seemed to be unaware of or ignored. For Catholic ultra-conservatives, problems like AIDS are cut and dried, e.g. condoms are evil, and so there is no need to discuss the matter further. Practice abstinence and fidelity. One might say church reformers turned to secular mechanisms (media and social movements) to correct misguided popes. It
is clear that this report marks the first time in 50 years that cardinals and bishops formed a social movement within the church in order to correct papal teaching and won. Protests against *Humanae Vitae* failed.

3) The Catholic church must change the way it does business because its present approach to solving problems is unsustainable. It takes too long to bring about needed change and in this case, people died in the process. Already eight dioceses in the United States have gone bankrupt due to the sexual abuse crisis and half the churches in Germany are without a pastor; the priest shortage is real. No organization can let one narrow philosophy dominate its central bureaucracy and survive. Fortunately dedicated individuals in the global church community have found creative ways to steer the wayward popes back to the path of enlightened Catholicism.

4) In the modern era, many organizations including several religions besides the Catholic church, must find ways to speed up change to better serve its members and minimize harm. Benedict has taken a big step in confronting the AIDS problem, but it took 30 years for church officials to see the light and alter their course. This was one major step for a pope, but one giant leap forward for the poor and suffering of this world.

Finally, we must make some assessment about damages done and
how this problem has harmed the Catholic church. Pulitzer prize-winning author, Garry Wills, contends that the church flaws we have noted above constitute an even greater scandal than the well publicized priest sexual abuse crisis.²⁸ Lives were crushed but no one died of pedophilia. Nicholas Kristof thinks that “when historians look back at the Catholic Church in this era, they'll give it credit for having fought Communism and helped millions of the poor around the world. But they'll also count its anti-condom campaign as among its most tragic mistakes in the first two millennia of its history.”²⁹ Clearly, this case study has been about a tragedy that should never have happened.

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