

# The Pope Versus AIDS

Last week as I was discussing the difficulty of communicating issues of faith on secular media, a Catholic friend of mine asked why the Pope had spoken out so boldly on the AIDS problem. It seemed to this liberal Catholic that the Pope had once again stuck his nose where it did not belong. Pope Benedict XVI made the following statement in Yaounde, Cameroon, "You can't resolve it with the distribution of condoms ...On the contrary, it increases the problem."

As far as I can tell, contrary to my friend's opinion, the Pope was right this time. In fact, his statement was not just a doctrinal position on sexuality; it was also a practical observation about a dreaded disease that the Roman Catholic Church has invested billions of dollars to fight around the world. I agree with the Pope that a responsible and moral attitude toward sex would help fight the disease.

It was appropriate that his statement was made in sub-Saharan Africa, where some 22 million people are infected with HIV (accounting for two-thirds of the world's infections in 2007, according to UNAIDS). Adding insult to injury, this region also accounted for three-quarters of all AIDS deaths in 2007. In four southern African countries, national adult HIV prevalence has exceeded 30 percent: Botswana (38.8 percent), Lesotho (31 percent), Swaziland (33.4 percent) and Zimbabwe (33.7 percent). Food crises faced in the latter three countries are also linked to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by some experts. In just the past year, the AIDS epidemic in Africa has claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million people in this region. Perhaps most concerning of all is the fact that more than eleven million children have been orphaned by AIDS, according to the UNAIDS 2008 report.

The Pope's observation about the use of condoms also applies to the spread of HIV in the developed world as well. There

needs to be a world- wide initiative aimed at two things: 1. stopping the spread of the disease and, 2. finding a medical cure for HIV/AIDS.

Just days before the Pope issued his statement in a far away national capital in the impoverished land of Cameroon, leaders in the world's most powerful city also threw up their hands in exasperation. Washington, DC health officials discovered that at least 3 percent of residents are living with HIV or AIDS. The report points to increases of incidence in every race and sex; in fact the disease has impacted every population and neighborhood within the District.

This is particularly disturbing compared to the 2006 report. The DC report does not conclusively show that condoms do not work. It suggests to me, that many people are not even trying to use condoms. The increase in the HIV/AIDS infection rate is not the only surprise in this work. Let's look a little deeper into the study.

Cases of HIV and AIDS in DC jumped 22 percent in the last two years. What has caused such an abrupt increase? The report states that men having sex with men accounts for most of the cases. Heterosexual transmission and injection drug use follow. The raw data states that of those living with AIDS, 37.5 percent were due to homosexual contact, 25.6 percent were due to heterosexual contact and 23.5 percent were due to drug use.

I was personally shocked by how many older people in the nation's most powerful city assumed that all "the noise" about safe sex was for someone else. Those in the 40-49 year age bracket had a startling 1 in 10 rate of occurrence among residents. Further, the black community in DC seems to need a very intense HIV/AIDS education program since black men reached the highest infection rate. In the 2008 DC update, the black female infection rate is equal to that of white males.

The overarching lesson the DC numbers show me is that the AIDS pandemic has similar dynamics here in the states as it does overseas. Dr. Shannon Hader, Director of the HIV/AIDS Administration at the DC Department of Health, stated (somewhat defensively) that Washington does not have the highest rate of the disease among the world's capital cities – but it does have the highest rate among US cities.

Thankfully, Dr. Hader stated that the District is still looking to initiate a comprehensive response, including early detection and prevention of ongoing transmission. Even the Washington HIV/AIDS Administration agrees that responsibility toward sexual encounters is a primary factor in preventing the virus from transmitting. In fact, Dr. Hader stated that along with other preventions, “...serious decisions about relationships can make a large prevention difference.”

In conclusion, let me applaud the Pope's boldness to state the primary way HIV/AIDS can be stopped. I felt sorry for him that his brave statements have been interpreted as petty, bigoted, and out of touch with modern sexuality. I also applaud the Roman Catholic Church for having the wisdom to minister to people around the world suffering with AIDS. Many of us non-Catholics are guilty of criticizing the way problems are being addressed without investing anything in a solution. For this reason, I have made a commitment to stamping out AIDS in our lifetime. I have raised thousands of dollars to fund research for a world famous, organization. My vehicle for raising the money was running several marathons. The fund raising has been my contribution. What's yours?

We should all do what the hymn writer said, “If everyone lit just one little candle, what a bright world this would be!” Let's take every opportunity to combat the spread of this dreaded disease.