

Pope claims condoms could make African Aids crisis worse

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The Pope today reignited the controversy over the Catholic church's stance on condom use as he made his first trip to Africa.

The pontiff said condoms were not the answer to the continent's fight against HIV and Aids and could make the problem worse.

Benedict XVI made his comments as he flew to Cameroon for the first leg of a six-day trip that will also see him travelling to Angola.

The timing of his remarks outraged health agencies trying to halt the spread of HIV and Aids in sub-Saharan Africa, where an estimated 22 million people are infected.

The Roman Catholic church encourages sexual abstinence and fidelity to prevent the disease from spreading, but it is a policy that has divided some clergy working with Aids patients.

The pontiff, speaking to journalists on his flight, said the condition was "a tragedy that cannot be overcome by money alone, that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which even aggravates the problems".

Rebecca Hodes, of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, said that if the Pope was serious about preventing new HIV infections he would focus on promoting wider access to condoms and spreading information about how best to use them.

Hodes, the director of policy, communication and research for the campaign group, added: "Instead, his opposition to condoms conveys that religious dogma is more important to him than the lives of Africans."

It is not the first time the Pope has made public remarks on the HIV/Aids outbreak ravaging the continent.

Shortly after becoming pontiff in 2005, he told senior Catholic clergy from Africa that, while the disease was a "cruel epidemic", it could not be cured through using condoms.

Addressing bishops from South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia and Lesotho who had travelled to the Vatican for papal audience, he said: "The traditional teaching of the church has proven to be the only failsafe way to prevent the spread of HIV/Aids."

He also warned them that African life was under threat from a number of factors, including condoms.

"It is of great concern that the fabric of African life, its very source of hope and stability, is threatened by divorce, abortion, prostitution, human trafficking and a contraception mentality," he added.

More than two-thirds – 67% – of the global total of 32.9 million people with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Three-quarters of all Aids deaths in 2007 happened there.

Africa is the fastest-growing region for the Roman Catholic church, which competes with Islam and evangelical churches.

The Pope also said today that he intended to make an appeal for "international solidarity" for Africa in the face of the global economic downturn.

He said that, while the church did not propose specific economic solutions, it could give "spiritual and moral" suggestions.

Describing the current crisis as the consequence of "a deficit of ethics in economic structures", he added: "It is here that the church can make a contribution."

Benedict dismissed claims that he was facing increasing opposition and isolation within the church, particularly after an outreach to ultra-conservatives led to him lifting the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop.

"The myth of my solitude makes me laugh," he said, adding that he could count on the network of friends and aides he saw every day.

In a letter to Catholic bishops, released last week, he made an unusual public acknowledgment of Vatican mistakes over the rehabilitation of Bishop Richard Williamson.

While acknowledging that errors had been made in handling the affair, Benedict said he was saddened that he was criticised "with open hostility" even by those who "should have known better".