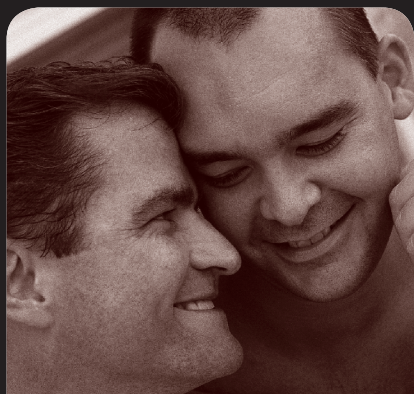




We believe in God.



We believe that sex is sacred.



We believe in caring for each other.



We believe in using condoms.

SEX IN THE HIV/AIDS ERA

A Guide for Catholics

Revised and Updated: 2008

CATHOLICS
FOR
CHOICE

Good Catholics Use Condoms

www.condoms4life.org | CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

The Catholic church and HIV/AIDS

“To stop transmission of a death-dealing virus [the use of condoms is] not only allowable, it’s a moral imperative.”

— BISHOP KEVIN DOWLING
OF RUSTENBURG,
SOUTH AFRICA,
CHICAGO TRIBUNE,
NOVEMBER 4, 2005

THE HIERARCHY OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH has developed its own unique response to the immense suffering that accompanies the spread of HIV/AIDS. When discussing the epidemic, the church speaks out about the dignity and value of every person, the rights and responsibilities of society and the love and compassion of God. Through its health-care facilities around the world, the church provides treatment and care for millions who are infected with the disease. Yet when it comes to prevention, the church has taken mixed positions. Most notably, the hierarchy has condemned the use of condoms. However, several Catholic bishops, many theologians and countless individual Catholics have made a case for their use.

The primary purpose of this brochure is to assist Catholics who are struggling with questions around faith, conscience, sexuality and the use of condoms for HIV prevention. The brochure provides information about HIV/AIDS and prevention, explores attitudes and realities regarding sex and sexuality in the HIV/AIDS era, looks at what the Vatican, individual bishops and theologians have said about condom use for HIV prevention, and considers some of the comprehensive strategies needed to curtail the spread of HIV.

The brochure also provide information to support educators and health-care workers who are helping Catholics make decisions about how to live healthy and responsible lives in the midst of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Since there are ways of transmitting HIV other than through sexual intercourse, this brochure should be used to complement scientific and technical information about the transmission of HIV and AIDS, prevention, treatment and care. We hope it will fill a gap in prevention

materials to serve the needs of everyone—not just Catholics—confronting moral, religious and spiritual concerns about HIV/AIDS and condom use.

Facts about HIV/AIDS

What is HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus, and is the cause of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). There are two types of HIV: HIV 1 is the most common strand and is found in all parts of the world and HIV 2, which is found mostly in West Africa. Transmission of both viruses can be prevented in the same ways.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV can be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse when one partner is already infected; through transfusion of infected blood; by the use and re-use of needles and medical instruments; and from mother to child during pregnancy, labor or breastfeeding.

How is the transmission of HIV prevented?

There are various ways individuals can prevent the transmission of HIV. For those who are sexually active, using a latex condom can help prevent infection, as can remaining faithful to your sexual partner, limiting your number of sexual partners, asking sexual partners to be tested for HIV, and engaging in sexual acts that have no risk of transmitting HIV (sex acts when only the outsides of people's bodies touch and there is no exchange of body fluids). Other means of prevention include sterilizing needles and medical instruments, not sharing needles among intravenous drug users, delaying one's first sexual encounter and abstaining from high-risk sexual activity.

“My life belongs to God, and God would not want me to allow somebody to be infected with the virus. So God will forgive my violation of church rules.”

— ROSA NA SOARES RIBEIRO,
COORDINATOR OF A
CATHOLIC-RUN AIDS
ORPHANAGE IN SAO PAULO,
BRAZIL, NEW YORK TIMES,
MAY 9, 2005



If I am sexually active, is it true that condoms will prevent me from getting HIV/AIDS?

When stored properly and used correctly and consistently, condoms are recognized internationally as the only protection for people having sexual intercourse—vaginal, anal or oral—against getting or transmitting HIV.

- When used consistently and correctly, latex male condoms are highly effective in reducing the risk of pregnancy and in preventing transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV. (CDC, Male Latex Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases, 2007)
- Laboratory studies demonstrate that latex condoms provide an essentially impermeable barrier to particles the size of HIV and other STI pathogens (CDC, 2007)
- Male and female condoms, which are 80-97 percent effective when used consistently and correctly, are the only contraceptive method that is effective at reducing the risk of both STIs and pregnancy. (American Foundation for AIDS Research, *Issue Brief: The Effectiveness of Condoms in Preventing HIV Transmission*, 2005)
- For most users, male and female condoms have fairly low rates of slippage or breakage, and such failure declines as users' experience with the method increases. About three percent of all female condoms slip after steady use, and less than one percent breaks. Similarly, three percent of male condoms break, and one percent slips. (Dore Hollander, "Failure Rates of Male and Female Condoms Fall with Use," *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 31:2, 2005)
- Often the main reason for condom failure is a failure to use them.

Who has HIV/AIDS and how many have died?

- Total number of adults and children living with HIV/AIDS throughout the world in 2007: **33.2 million**
- Number of young people (15-24 years old) living with HIV/AIDS in 2007: **5.4 million**
- Number of children under 15 years old living with HIV/AIDS in 2007: **2.1 million**
- People newly infected with HIV in 2007: **2.5 million**
- AIDS Deaths in 2007: **2.1 million**

(UNAIDS, 2007 *AIDS Epidemic Update*, December 2007)

- Total number of children who lost one or both parents to AIDS at the end of 2005: **15.2 million**

(UNAIDS, 2006 *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*, May 2006)

Clearly, the epidemic has reached crisis proportions.

Do Catholics have AIDS?

As Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, has said, “We the church community have AIDS.” Although it is difficult to find reliable statistics on how many Catholics actually have been infected by HIV/AIDS, we know from the funerals that take place in Catholic parishes around the world that Catholic people are suffering and dying from AIDS.

Sex in the HIV/AIDS era

IT MAY SEEM somewhat out of place to talk about the goodness of sex and sexual pleasure in a brochure about HIV prevention. However, since the HIV/AIDS epidemic began, language and discourse around sex and sexuality have become increasingly tainted with fear, anxiety and trepidation. This is understandable given

“If an infected husband wants to have sex with his wife who isn’t infected, then she must defend herself by whatever means necessary... If a wife can defend herself from having sex by whatever means necessary, why not with a condom?”

— CARDINAL JAVIER
LOZANO BARRAGAN,
HEAD OF THE PONTIFICAL
COUNCIL FOR PASTORAL
ASSISTANCE TO HEALTH
CARE WORKERS, NATIONAL
CATHOLIC REPORTER,
FEBRUARY 25, 2005

that a primary means of transmitting the disease is through sexual intercourse. Unfortunately, much of the language around HIV/AIDS has resulted in reinforcing negative attitudes towards sex and the body leading to the stigmatization of and discrimination against those who are infected with HIV/AIDS. If prevention methods are to work, it is essential that society becomes more open to frank discussions about sex and sexuality.

Responsible and mature sexual behavior in all sexual relationships is essential during this crisis. People with the disease may be in greater need of the basic human desire to form bonds of communion with loved ones, to express love and comfort while receiving compassion, and to receive affection and healing. Many studies have demonstrated that sexual expression can lead to improvements in overall health, including stress reduction, longevity, decreased risk of cancer and heart disease, bolstered immune system, improved sleep patterns, decrease in risk of depression and suicide—all benefits that are particularly important to those living with HIV/AIDS. (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc., *The Health Benefits of Sexual Expression*, 2003)

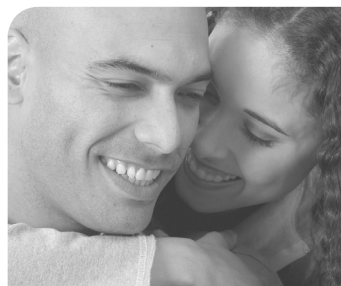
We are at a time in the AIDS crisis when we need to remember that sexuality is a gift from God and that the Catholic church teaches that the body is inherently good and holy. Catholic faith and tradition also inform our understanding that God is present in the human experience. Therefore a responsible and mature sex life must be one that embodies justice, respect and human dignity—one that is free from fear and anxiety, free from violence and coercion.

Young people—15-24 year-olds—account for 40 percent of all new HIV infections worldwide. (WHO/UNICEF, *Global Consultation on Strengthening the Health Sector*

Response to Care, Support, Treatment and Prevention for Young People Living with HIV, 2006) Young people need the information, skills and services necessary to protect themselves from HIV infection. Young people also need honest and age-appropriate information about sex, intimacy and sexuality that is respectful of their needs, sexual experiences and desires for mature and just relationships. Rights-based comprehensive education programs for adolescents that incorporate HIV/AIDS and reproductive and sexual health are critical to the health and livelihood of young people throughout the world.

Close to half of adults living with HIV around the world are women. Many are unable to negotiate the conditions under which they have sex or cannot insist that their partner uses a condom and are more susceptible to HIV infection. Male partners may become violent if women refuse their sexual advances and coerced or forced sex increase the risk of HIV infection. (UNFPA, *Gender-based Violence Increases Women's Risk for HIV Infection*, 2007) In addition, some women don't know about their partner's HIV-risk factors, such as unprotected sex with other partners including men, or intravenous drug use. Coercive sex at a young age may also inhibit a woman's ability to negotiate safer sex practices later in life and may lead to increased sexual risk-taking, making them more vulnerable to acquiring HIV. (Population Council, *The Adverse Health and Social Outcomes of Sexual Coercion: Experiences of young women in developing countries*, June 2004)

However, women should not be seen solely as victims. Grassroots activism by women, including in particular women living with HIV/AIDS, has had noted successes. To build on these successes, women need expanded access to sexual and reproductive health and education services, including the skills required to negotiate



safer sexual relations, and increased access to female-controlled prevention methods, such as the female condom. Women and men need government, church and community support in their efforts to combat gender discrimination and increase women's social and economic autonomy.

Violence against women, child abuse, discrimination and stigmatization must be addressed in the context of promoting mature and responsible sexual behavior to ensure satisfying and safe sex lives for all women and men.

Reading the signs of the times: condoms in a changing world

ECONOMIC, social and cultural conditions have changed to offer new challenges to the Catholic hierarchy's view that only in a lifelong, monogamous heterosexual marriage is sexual expression morally permitted. Even those who accept this view may not be able to live their own lives accordingly. In many places, attitudes and practices around sex have become more mature, responsible and compassionate. Furthermore, not all sex within lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage is holy and not all sex outside of such marriages is sinful. The ethical norms by which we judge the goodness of sex and condom use must expand beyond considerations of marital status.

- Unmarried people are sexually active and want and need information to act maturely and responsibly.
- Same-sex commitments are rightly more accepted and the human and sexual rights of all people should be upheld regardless of sexual orientation.

- The demands of work may lead to husbands and wives being separated for long periods of time, leading to a greater possibility of sex with other partners.
- Using a condom should be a sign of trust and associated with responsible and mature sex.

Regardless of sexual orientation and marital status, people can and do establish loving and committed relationships in which sexual expression is healthy and holy.

Even if one strictly adheres to the current institutional church's position that sex is only moral within marriage, we must make sure that the hierarchy's prohibition does not become a death sentence for those who do not agree, for those who agree and fail, or for those who are coerced into sex.

- Spouses must be able to protect themselves if their partner has been unfaithful or has HIV.
- We live in a world where many women are unable to decide for themselves about if, when and how sex takes place and where violations of women occur far too often.
- Natural disasters place refugees in situations where they are more likely to have unprotected sex.

All of us need society and our institutions, religious or otherwise, to help protect us from the diseases that can follow from these circumstances. The Catholic hierarchy, along with policy makers, need to condemn oppression and violence against women while supporting and implementing policies that put an end to the threat of sexual coercion and violence. The hierarchy must ensure the availability of comprehensive, accurate and nonjudgmental information about condoms, abstinence, fidelity and positive sexuality.

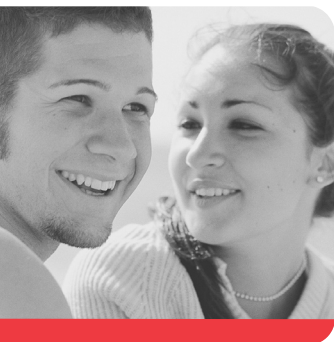
“Abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in a marriage is beyond the realm of possibility here. The issue is to protect life. That must be our fundamental goal. [African people] must use condoms.”

— BISHOP KEVIN DOWLING
OF RUSTENBURG,
SOUTH AFRICA, GRAND
RAPIDS PRESS (MICHIGAN),
APRIL 15, 2007

What does the Catholic church say about condoms?

“If a partner in a marriage is infected with HIV, the use of condoms makes sense.”

— CARDINAL CHRISTIAN
WIYGHAN TUMI OF
DOUALA, CAMEROON.
TABLET (UK),
MAY 11, 2006



ALL CATHOLICS need to interpret relevant church teachings and apply them to the problem of preventing HIV/AIDS. There is no one Catholic position on using condoms to prevent the transmission of HIV. Some church leaders have interpreted church teachings on contraception as prohibiting the use of condoms, despite the threat of HIV/AIDS. Other leaders have looked to church teachings—such as those on the importance of preserving life, preventing evil and honoring the conscience of individuals—and interpreted them as permitting the use of condoms. As Catholics we must consider all church teachings in light of our circumstances and do what our consciences tell us is correct.

Institutionally, the Catholic church has taken the position that the only morally acceptable way to avoid HIV/AIDS is to abstain from sex outside of marriage and to abstain from sex within marriage if a husband or wife is infected with HIV. Its position is based on the church's teaching that sex should only take place within marriage and should always be open to procreation. This view of sex and procreation does not promote responsible and mature sexuality. It is important that Catholics know that we have choices and know what the church teaches about conscience, the common good, compassion and the principle of the “lesser evil” so that we can make mature, responsible decisions about our sex lives:

● **Conscience:** Everybody has the right to act on their conscience. “It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of divine law. He is bound

to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity... He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience..." (Pope Paul VI, *Declaration on Religious Freedom—Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965)

● **Common Good:** "The common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as 'the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard...privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion.'" (Number 1907, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994)

● **Compassion:** "Jesus had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless." (Mt. 9:36) There are numerous examples in the Bible of how Jesus showed love and compassion for all—without judgment or discrimination. We are called to have compassion for those who suffer.

● **The Lesser Evil:** Catholic tradition allows acting in a usually impermissible way if doing so avoids participating in or causing a greater iniquity or immoral act. This is often referred to as the principle of the lesser of two evils. Some members of the Catholic hierarchy argue that the use of condoms is evil, but others assert that, in defense of life, condom use may be or even must be a legitimate option when contracting HIV would place another person's life or health in jeopardy.

"Today, Catholic institutions usually provide information on all paths of infection and possible ways of protection. It is up to individuals to decide whether they use condoms or not. Not referring to condoms would be withholding information."

— BISHOP FRANZ KAMPHAUS
OF LIMBURG, GERMANY
FURROW (IRELAND),
JULY/AUGUST 2005

Can Catholics Use Condoms?

SOME CHURCH LEADERS may tell you that using condoms is morally wrong. But if you or your partner has other sexual partners, or if one of you is infected already with HIV, then it can be a morally good decision to use a condom. Sometimes, Catholic teaching uses the “lesser of two evils” approach to making moral decisions. This approach looks at the complexities of our lives and the decisions we face, and recognizes that it is often necessary to choose between the lesser of two evils in difficult situations. While some modern theologians reserve the term “evil” for only the most extreme violations of human rights, such as genocide, murder and torture, certainly the use of a condom must be a “lesser evil” than threatening someone’s life with a deadly disease.

Regardless of your approach to moral decision-making, the Catholic hierarchy teaches that God gave each of us a conscience and no one should be forced to act against his or her conscience. If you carefully and prayerfully examine your conscience and decide that to use condoms is the most moral way to act, you are not committing a sin. To save a life is not a sin.

ABCs of prevention: Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms

MANY GOVERNMENTS, civil society organization and religious leaders have adopted a three-prong strategy known as ABC to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. ABC stands for abstain, be faithful and use condoms for those who are sexually active. However, the ABC model has had limited success; an integrated and comprehensive approach is key to effectively preventing HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, exportation of the ABC model and

its use by some conservative governments has been done in a hierarchical fashion, with the promotion of abstinence presented as the primary choice, then being faithful to your partner, and lastly, condom use. Often condom education and distribution is restricted to only populations deemed “appropriate,” then narrowly defining “appropriate” as only for “high-risk” groups, such as sex workers and serodiscordant couples, in which one partner is HIV-positive and the other is HIV-negative.

This hierarchical framework has negatively impacted those infected with HIV and those at risk of HIV on several levels. The isolation of “high risk” groups further marginalizes already vulnerable individuals and misrepresents the level of risk in many countries. Given the high HIV-prevalence rates in many countries, the reality is that everyone is “high risk” and people need HIV-prevention education, including condom education, before they risk infection or become HIV-positive. The hierarchical model also reinforces a false stereotype that AIDS is a disease that only affects those who are promiscuous. Such a stereotype perpetuates the stigmatization of and discrimination against those infected with HIV. It does not take into account the reality of women who cannot refuse sex, even with their husbands, and the fact that marriage is not necessarily a protective factor. Finally, it reinforces negative attitudes towards sex and sexuality when abstinence is placed above having sex safely.

There is a danger that too much emphasis on the ABC approach can undermine the critical role of integrated strategies of prevention that incorporate empowerment of women and girls and other gender-sensitive initiatives: voluntary counseling, testing and referral; treatment, care and prevention; antipoverty initiatives; and comprehensive sexuality education. AIDS is a complex disease and needs complex responses.

“With some counseling—and this is something we don’t tell everyone—you can ask couples to use condoms, so that the rate of re-infection goes down.”

— ARCHBISHOP BONIFACE
LELE OF MOMBASA, KENYA
KENYA LONDON NEWS,
AUGUST 25, 2006

Conclusion



THE LARGELY NEGATIVE response among Catholic bishops about sex and condom use exposes the need to maintain sexual honesty during the HIV/AIDS era. Governments, civil society organizations and religious leaders must make greater strides not only to provide comprehensive prevention programs as described above, but also to speak positively and honestly about sex, violence against women and girls, and HIV/AIDS prevention so that every person can strive for a mature and responsible sex life free from fear, anxiety and violence.

Here are some specific steps that can be taken:

- Talk about what it means to engage in mature and responsible sex that is consensual and respectful of human dignity.
- Condemn sexual violence which in all cases should be reported to civil authorities and the perpetrators punished.
- Recognize and affirm men's rights and responsibilities and their commitment to safe and mature sexual relationships.
- Engage in behavior that respects individual human rights. Demand that others respect your human rights.
- Be informed:
 - Know the facts about the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other STIs.
 - Know what sexual acts have no risk of transmitting HIV, which ones have a low risk and which ones have a high risk.
 - Know how to prevent the sexual transmission of diseases, as well as unintended pregnancy.
 - Know the facts about condoms, where to obtain them and how to use them correctly.

- Know how to access treatment, care and support if you or a loved one is infected.
 - Know your choices.
- Think and talk positively about sex and condoms: Condoms can enable those with HIV/AIDS to continue living their sexual lives fully, safely and with satisfaction.

The Condoms4Life Campaign

Condoms4Life is an unprecedented world-wide public education effort to raise public awareness about the devastating effect of the bishops' ban on condoms. The campaign was launched on World AIDS Day 2001 with the display of billboards and ads in subways and newspapers saying, "Banning Condoms Kills."

Since its inception, Condoms4Life has developed new newspaper and billboard advertisements, internet action alerts and educational materials geared to reach Catholics at risk of HIV/AIDS that have appeared in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Condoms4Life has also honored bishops who have promoted sensible and compassionate policies on condom use through its "Good

Shepherd" awards, and it has mobilized activists throughout the world to encourage bishops to promote a culture of life by lifting the ban on condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In August 2005, the campaign unveiled giant billboards in the Dom (Cathedral) metro station in Cologne, Germany, during Catholic World Youth Day, a jamboree attended by nearly one million young Catholics. The ads proclaimed in German, English and Spanish that "Good Catholics Use Condoms." The campaign attracted extensive media interest and press coverage with international print, radio and television coverage about campaign. More importantly, our presence forced a number of cardinals and bishops to acknowledge that condoms are a crucial

part of the fight against HIV/AIDS.

More recently, the campaign sponsored an international poll which interviewed Catholics living in Ghana, Ireland, Mexico, the Philippines and the United States. The poll found that Catholics the world over believe that using condoms is prolific because it prevents the spread of HIV/AIDS. Full details about the poll are available on the Web site: www.CatholicsForChoice.org.

The Condoms4Life campaign is sponsored by Catholics for Choice, its partners in Europe and Latin America and colleagues in Africa and Asia.

The Condoms4Life Web site contains facts on HIV/AIDS and on the Catholic hierarchy's opposition to condoms around the world.

www.Condoms4Life.org

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

President

Jon O'Brien

Vice President

Sara Morello

Board of Directors

Marysa Navarro-Araguren, *Chair*

Sheila Briggs

Pat Carbine (Treasurer)

Barbara DeConcini

Susan Farrell

Cheryl Francisconi

Ofelia Garcia

Eileen Moran, *Secretary*

Rosemary Radford Ruether

Albert George Thomas

Marian Stewart Titus

Susan Wysocki

Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make decisions about their lives.

Catholics for Choice

1436 U Street, NW, Suite 301
Washington, DC 20009
tel 202-986-6093
fax 202-332-7995

Email: cfc@catholicsforchoice.org

Web: www.catholicsforchoice.org
www.Condoms4Life.org

International Partners

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir
Córdoba, Argentina

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Bolivia
La Paz, Bolivia

Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir
Sao Paulo, Brasil

Catholics for a Free Choice Canada
Toronto, Canada

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Chile
Valparaíso, Chile

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Colombia
Bogotá, Colombia

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en El Salvador
San Salvador, El Salvador

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en España
Madrid, España

Catholics for Choice Europe
Frankfurt, Germany

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en México
México D.F., México

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Nicaragua
Managua, Nicaragua

Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir en Paraguay
Asunción, Paraguay

ISBN 0-915365-91-X

© 2008, Catholics for Choice

All rights reserved. Originally published in 2003,
revised and updated in 2006 and 2008.

Please cite as:

Catholics for Choice, *Sex in the HIV/AIDS Era:
A Guide for Catholics*, Washington, DC, 2008.