

Clarion call on condoms

Comments by one of the Church's most influential cardinals coupled with news of a Pontifical Council for Health Care report have fuelled speculation that the Vatican may be changing its view on the use of condoms in the fight against Aids

There is arguably no Catholic Church leader – save the Pope – who has a larger international following than Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ. When the 79-year-old retired Archbishop of Milan says something, people tend to take careful notice. Thus, it came as no surprise that his comments last week in a leading Italian news magazine on a wide range of so-called “life issues” were quickly reported around the globe, especially his apparent openness to the use of condoms in combating the spread of Aids.

A day after *L'Espresso* published Cardinal Martini's “conversation” with an Italian surgeon on several “grey areas” in the field of “bio-ethics”, the president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care – Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán – told *La Repubblica* that his Vatican office was currently working with scientists and theologians to prepare a paper on the condom question. “The Pope asked us for this document practically at the beginning of his pontificate,” the 73-year-old Mexican cardinal said, adding that he hoped it would be ready “within a few months”.

What everyone wanted to know was whether the impending Vatican text would side with Cardinal Martini's views or not. On the other hand, if the Jesuit scholar knew such a document was still in the preparatory phase, were his comments timed to influence the commission?

Up to now, Pope Benedict XVI has insisted that the only sure way to prevent the transmission of HIV-Aids is through sexual abstinence for the unmarried and monogamous fidelity for those who are wedded. Condoms have, so far, found no place in the 79-year-old Pope's teachings. Like other forms of artificial birth control, their use is rejected, according to the teaching of the Church enshrined in Paul VI's encyclical



Saso Aids orphanage in Moonooi, South Africa, 2003. Photo: Glenn Edwards, from his collection *Africa Against All Odds* (www.africaagainstallodds.com)

Humanae Vitae. But in 1968, of course, there was no Aids or HIV virus or, at least, it had not yet been identified.

Now with more than 39 million people around the world living with HIV, and Aids claiming the lives of around 3 million people in 2004 alone, the call for the Church to reconsider its position on the use of condoms has grown. The calls have increased as the pandemic has swept through Africa: nearly two-thirds of people infected with HIV live in sub-Saharan Africa where infection has risen dramatically among women. Some churchmen, including Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, Archbishop of Durban, say that promoting condoms has failed to stem the spread of Aids and may have increased promiscuity. But others including Bishop Kevin Dowling, of Rustenburg, South Africa, urge that while abstinence and fidelity are vital tools in the fights against Aids, condom use is important as well.

Indeed, Cardinal Martini was echoing what many Catholics, including several other bishops and cardinals, have been advocating for some time now. Cardinal Godfried Danneels (Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels), and Cardinal Georges Cottier OP (former Theologian of the Papal Household), to name but a few prominent churchmen – have all provided similar and even bolder arguments for the possible use of condoms in stopping the spread of the HIV virus that causes Aids.

The difference is that none of them is Cardinal Martini. Even after nearly four full years

of retirement, the regal-looking Jesuit is still the giant of the College of Cardinals. The Turin native is the undisputed standard-bearer for moderate and progressive-minded Catholics and is even held in high esteem by conservatives including Pope Benedict XVI, who has personally consulted him at length at least twice since his election.

Cardinal Martini is obviously conscious of his stature and he has been careful not to allow his pronouncements to create divisions. Instead, he has entered into the Church's thorniest debates judiciously, with an almost strategic prudence and a conscientious sense of measure.

Others are also well aware of the authority he wields. When the cardinal expressed desire to retire full-time to Jerusalem where he studied scripture as a young man, the Israeli Government and the Vatican Secretariat of State grew nervous; the latter out of concern that the still able Martini could be manipulated by some as a sort of Holy Land “anti-pope” to challenge the increasingly enfeebled John Paul. Obediently, the retired cardinal now spends only part of the year in Jerusalem.

This is the backdrop to the wide reporting on the cardinal's statement last week. “*Così è la Vita*” (“Such is Life”) was the catchy title *L'Espresso* chose for the 10-page article in which Cardinal Martini said that “in certain situations, the use of the condom could constitute a lesser evil”. The magazine piece (dated 27 April, but released several

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days earlier) was in the form of a written correspondence between the cardinal and a transplant specialist at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Dr Ignazio Marino.

"Dear Professor Marino," the cardinal begins, "I read your book, *To Believe and To Cure*, with great interest." He then invites the surgeon to join him in a "necessary and urgent 'dialogue on life'" which is "open and free, and at the same time respectful and responsible".

The Tablet has learned that this epistolary conversation was concluded at least several weeks before its publication. The delayed release avoided any semblance of Cardinal Martini endorsing Dr Marino's candidacy to the Italian senate. The surgeon was subsequently elected on 10 April as a member of the new Prime Minister Romano Prodi's centre-Left coalition.

Throughout their conversation Cardinal Martini stays carefully within the confines of the papal Magisterium, often invoking the long-standing moral principle of the *minus malum* or the lesser evil. And concerning those grey areas where the "true good" is not evident, he says it would be a "good rule to abstain from judging too quickly and thus discuss calmly, in order not to create useless divisions".

The cardinal responds to the surgeon on a number of issues including the beginning of life, artificial insemination, stem-cell research, adoption for single parents, abortion and euthanasia.

On Aids and condoms, he wrote: "There is the particular situation of spouses, one of whom is affected by Aids. It is the obligation of this spouse to protect the other partner and they must be able to protect themselves. But the question is whether it is up to the religious authorities to promote such a means of defence, with the result, in a sense, that the other morally sustainable means, including abstinence, could be put on a second level, while one risks to promote irresponsible behaviour. The principle of the lesser evil is one thing, and it may be applied in cases that are foreseen by ethical doctrine, but it involves another topic to express such things publicly."

The carefully nuanced responses Cardinal Martini offered in last week's news magazine could be more than just an effort to keep his Church credibly engaged in what he called the "dialogue on life". His intervention on these bio-ethical issues might also be intended as a clarion call to halt the Vatican's acceleration towards more entrenched positions regarding not only the secular world, but also the formulation of church doctrine and ecclesiology. Such hardened stances would be difficult to amend later on. The Jesuit cardinal may have spoken up at this particular moment in time in order to encourage other church leaders to speak frankly on a whole host of delicate topics. Up to now, such voices have been almost inaudible.

■ Robert Mickens is *The Tablet's* Rome correspondent.

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