

Papal comments on condoms reflected pastoral concern, theologian says

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI's recent comments about condoms represented a "normal and traditional" pastoral application of moral theology, according to a theologian who advises the Vatican on doctrinal matters.

The pope's comments reflect the principle that there can be "intermediary steps toward moral awareness" that allow for some flexibility in how church teachings are applied, Franciscan Father Maurizio Faggioni said Dec. 3.

Father Faggioni, a moral theologian and a consultant to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, spoke to Catholic News Service about the reaction to the pope's statement on condoms in the book, "Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times."

In the book, the pope repeated his view that condom campaigns are not the way to stop the AIDS epidemic, but he allowed that in some specific cases - for example, a prostitute who tries to diminish the risk of spreading infection - use of a condom could be a first step toward taking moral responsibility for one's actions.

Father Faggioni said the pope's comments should be seen in the light of traditional principles of moral theology, including gradualism, which understands moral decision-making as a path that involves a series of progressions.

"The Holy Father recognizes that there is a path of growth in responsibility," Father Faggioni said. By saying condom use may mark a step along that path, he said, the pope is allowing for a "wise and prudent" application of church teaching to individual cases.

"This is nothing more than a normal and traditional application of some principles of pastoral teaching and of moral casuistry," Father Faggioni said. Moral casuistry refers to a method that tries to determine appropriate moral responses to particular

cases and circumstances.

Father Faggioni said the pope's comments do not place in question the church's teaching against birth control, but recognize that there can be different ways of applying the general law to specific situations.

"One could ask to which other cases this would extend. This is something that will be seen. One should not force the words of the Holy Father, either," he said.

Father Faggioni noted that the Vatican's doctrinal congregation began studying the morality of condom use in disease prevention at a time when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger - now Pope Benedict - was the congregation's prefect.

He said the pope had chosen an informal medium, that of a book-length interview, to discuss the issue. In the strict sense, then, his words do not have the weight of official church teaching, he said.

But at the same time, Father Faggioni said, the pope knows what he's talking about, having followed the theological discussion on this issue for many years. He said commentators should remember this when suggesting, as some have, that the pope may have strayed outside his field of expertise.

"This is the pope speaking, after all," Father Faggioni said. "He is the supreme teacher."