Vatican: Pope’s words on condoms do not mark change in church teaching

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI’s recent comments on condom use in AIDS prevention do not signify a change in the church’s moral teaching or its pastoral practice, a note from the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation said.

The note, released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Dec. 21, said the pope’s remarks do not represent a break with the church’s doctrine on birth control, and cannot be construed to legitimize the use of condoms to prevent pregnancy.

It said that when Pope Benedict said condom use to reduce the risk of infection might be a first step toward moral awakening, he was referring specifically to prostitution, which is already considered gravely immoral by the church.

In that situation, it said, use of a condom is not a “solution” because it does not address the mistaken behavior that is the root cause of the problem. However, it added, “it cannot be denied that anyone who uses a condom in order to diminish the risk posed to another person is intending to reduce the evil connected with his or her immoral activity.”

The note was published following widespread discussion of Pope Benedict’s comments in a book-length interview, “Light of the World: The Pope, the Church and the Signs of the Times.”

The doctrinal congregation said the pope’s words had in some cases been
misunderstood, erroneously interpreted and manipulated to make it seem that his statement represented a break with the church’s teaching against contraception.

In the book, the pope was asked whether it was “madness to forbid a high-risk population to use condoms” in view of the AIDS epidemic.

“There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward discovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality,” the pope said.

The doctrinal congregation’s note said it should be clear that the pope “was talking neither about conjugal morality nor about the moral norm concerning contraception.”

“The idea that anyone could deduce from the words of Benedict XVI that it is somehow legitimate, in certain situations, to use condoms to avoid an unwanted pregnancy is completely arbitrary and is in no way justified either by his words or in his thought,” it said.

The note said the pope was referring to “the completely different case of prostitution,” an immoral practice which has been made even more serious by the spread of HIV/AIDS.

“Those who know themselves to be infected with HIV and who therefore run the risk of infecting others, apart from committing a sin against the Sixth Commandment are also committing a sin against the Fifth Commandment – because they are consciously putting the lives of others at risk through behavior which has repercussions on public health,” it said.
The pope’s affirmation that using a condom with the intent of reducing infection could be a “first step” toward moral awakening is clearly compatible with his previous statement that condoms are not the way to deal with the AIDS epidemic, the note said.

Neither the doctrinal note nor the pope’s book specifically addressed the situation of condom use by a married couple in which one spouse has HIV.

The doctrinal congregation said some have mistakenly interpreted the pope’s words as an endorsement of the argument that, because of the lethal consequences of AIDS, condom use may be tolerated as a “lesser evil.” It said the “lesser evil” theory is susceptible to “proportionalistic misinterpretation.”

“The Holy Father did not say – as some people have claimed – that prostitution with the use of a condom can be chosen as a lesser evil. The church teaches that prostitution is immoral and should be shunned,” it said.

“However, those involved in prostitution who are HIV positive and who seek to diminish the risk of contagion by the use of a condom may be taking the first step in respecting the life of another – even if the evil of prostitution remains in all its gravity. This understanding is in full conformity with the moral theological tradition of the church,” it said.