

I have held my pen back for long enough as I have read various reactions to Cardinal Martini’s comments on the prevention of HIV infection. Similar bewilderment has followed comments by other no less eminent theologians. Brendan Malone’s article (NZ Catholic, June 4, 2006) concerns the *effectiveness* or otherwise of condoms. That is a disputed matter about which I have no comment to make. Instead, I wish to comment on what Brendan calls “the theological and moral implications of a change in Catholic teaching”.

The idea that Cardinal Martini’s comments involve a *change* in the Church’s teaching comes about because people have inflated the Church’s teaching on contraception, equating it with a ban on condoms (and “the pill”). To inflate the Church’s teaching in that way is misleading and can bring the Church’s teaching into disrepute.

The question about whether in some circumstances it is permissible to use condoms is not a question about whether there can be “exceptions” to the Church’s teaching; not even exceptions in special circumstances. Rather, it is about circumstances that fall *outside the Church’s teaching on contraception*.

The Church’s teaching that contraception is wrong concerns sexual intercourse freely entered into between husband and wife. That is the context in which sexual activity finds its meaning, and in which *every* intended contraceptive action is wrong. .

The Church’s teaching on contraception never was about sexual activity outside of marriage. One only has to read *Humanae Vitae* properly to see that. The Church has no official teaching about contraception outside the context that gives sexual intercourse its meaning. Sexual intercourse outside that context is wrong for *other reasons*.

In some of those situations, contraception is not necessarily wrong at all; e.g. when contraceptive medication is taken by people in danger of being raped. In such cases, we are not dealing with *exceptions* to the Church’s teaching, but with situations that fall *outside* the Church’s teaching on contraception. Those who think this is wrong might ask themselves: how did the Holy Office, under Cardinal Ottaviani in the time of Pope Pius XII, get it so wrong when he confirmed that it was ethical for nuns living in fear of being raped (in the Congo) to take contraceptive measures.

In the case of consensual intercourse outside of marriage (for which the use of condoms is sometimes advocated), the ethical question is not about contraception but about whether the easier availability of condoms will result in greater promiscuity and greater risk of infection. That calls for a prudential judgement, which can vary from one situation to another. It has nothing to do with exceptions to the Church’s teaching; once again it falls outside the context in which contraception is wrong.

Finally, in the case of consensual intercourse inside of marriage: when the intention really is to prevent a serious infection, the contraceptive effect of a barrier is a side-effect, i.e. not the directly intended effect (which for a sufficiently serious reason can be allowed to happen). This is an application of traditional moral principles which are recognised as part of the Church’s teaching. It is not an exception to the Church’s teaching.

Only to those who thought the Church’s teaching on contraception was mainly about condoms will this appear to be a change in the Church’s teaching.