

To the Editors

Condoms and the Vatican

Your esteemed Journal of September 2006, [1] carries an extract of an editorial that appeared in the *Lancet*, captioned, "Condoms and the Vatican" [2] in which Pope Benedict XVI is chided for making the "palpably untrue" statement that, "the traditional teaching of the Church has proven to be the only failsafe way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS".

This is not the first occasion the medical community has taken note of the Vatican's views on contraception that are not only medically and scientifically inaccurate, [3,4], but are also, poignantly, unsupported by the scriptures [5].

HIV/AIDS transmitted by sexual intercourse can be prevented to a large extent by the use of condoms by married couples. The Vatican's stand of proscribing the use of condoms, either for prevention of disease or pregnancy, does not stem from the principles enunciated in the Bible which the Church claims to base its teachings on. Family planning and birth-control are not discussed in the Bible. (The experience of Onan does not support the outlawing and prohibition of contraception, as his penalty was not, as erroneously thought, for preventing birth but for failure to perform 'brother-in-law marriage' [6] – a function required by the law in operation at that time.)

The Church's stance in disallowing contraception is flawed, as its view that the only legitimate reason for sexual relations between married couples is to procreate, is not upheld in the scriptures. Does the Church prohibit sexual relations among married couples for the reason that they are unable to procreate when the wife reaches menopause, either naturally (from as early as in her forties), or following hysterectomy or bilateral oophorectomy?

When no direct decree is provided on a matter, a 'believer' is constrained solely by his or her conscience, and other stated biblical principles. For example, the Bible has a high regard for life in utero, and causing the death of a foetus is considered to be of the same magnitude as taking a human life. This principle of sanctity of intrauterine life is respected by not resorting to methods of contraception that interfere with the established zygote. Avoidance of fertilization, however, either by hormonal manipulation or by physical means (using condoms), have no biblical prohibition.

In consequence of the foregoing, Pope Benedict XVI "certainly needs to receive some good medical advice" as the editorial in the *Lancet* recommends. For that reason it is heartening to observe that the Pope has commissioned, "a very profound scientific, technical, and moral study" [2] on this topic. Additionally, he will benefit significantly with some accurate scriptural counsel.

References

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5. Jayasekara Geri. Religion, family planning, and sexual behaviour. *Lancet* 1993; **342**: 1180.
6. The Bible; Book of Genesis **38**: 8-10.

Geri Jayasekara, Professor in Surgery, Faculty of Medicine, (University of Colombo), Kynsey Road, Colombo 8.
e-mail: <sirgeri@gmail.com>. I declare that I have no conflicts of interest relevant to this issue.