

## The Pope and science

We strongly support the concept, reported in your Editorial of Jan 26,<sup>1</sup> that “the Pope has shown signs of supporting science”. However, we disagree with the opinion that “only progressive Catholics remind us that science and religion are not incompatible”.

We are Catholic doctors and nurses with several years of experience in the service of people with HIV/AIDS and in the fight against the epidemic, informed and sustained by our faith. Our experience shows that the traditional Catholic position on condoms and AIDS is the most reasonable and scientifically sound for the prevention of AIDS epidemics.

We know how important condoms can be in focal epidemics in high-risk groups; there is limited or no direct evidence, however, that the common and popular prevention measures, including social marketing of condoms, voluntary counselling and testing, and syndromic or mass treatment of sexually transmitted infections, have contributed to the reduction or slowing down of HIV in generalised epidemics.<sup>2</sup>

Uganda has a record of success in the fight against HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Studies from leading scientific journals show that the major factor in the decrease of HIV prevalence in Uganda was the reduction in casual, multipartner sex: the B of ABC. In Uganda, Kenya, and Zambia, increases in abstinence behaviours have been associated with falls in HIV prevalence.<sup>4</sup> All successful stories in Africa have been preceded by declines in casual and premarital sex, generally registered 5–6 years before the evidence of decline.<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church, along with many others, has promoted exactly this type of behaviour.

The “dialogue between scientists and the Catholic Church” has always been kept open, because many scientists are Catholics and the progress of science would be inconceivable without them. Interpretation of the Catholic religion as prejudicially against science is simply against evidence.

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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- 1 The Lancet. The Pope and science. *Lancet* 2008; **371**: 276.
- 2 Shelton JD. Ten myths and one truth about generalised HIV epidemics. *Lancet* 2007; **370**: 1809–11.
- 3 Green EC, Halperin DT, Nantulya V, Hogle JA. Uganda's HIV prevention success: the role of sexual behavior change and the national response. *AIDS Behav* 2006; **10**: 347–50.
- 4 Bessinger R, Akwara P, Halperin D. Sexual behavior, HIV and fertility trends: a comparative analysis of six countries; phase I of the ABC Study. Chapel Hill, NC: Measure Evaluation, 2003.
- 5 MEASURE DHS. Demographic and health surveys. <http://www.measuredhs.com/> (accessed March 10, 2008).

We were surprised to read your Jan 26 Editorial criticising Pope Benedict XVI because of his stance on abortion and condoms.<sup>1</sup> Weeks earlier a full page was laudatory of the “condom king”, a Thai social marketer.<sup>2</sup> Our concern is that this reputed scientific journal might compromise its prestige by indulging in political-ideological agendas.

Effective population control of sexually transmitted infections (STI) requires more than condom-centred approaches. Delaying sexual debut, mutual monogamy, and, above all, reducing the number of partners are crucial. These epidemiological truisms comprise the ABC strategy: abstinence, be faithful to one partner, and use condoms. Partner reduction and delayed sexual debut, more than condom use, have been of paramount importance in curbing HIV epidemics.<sup>3</sup> The simplistic message of “condoms and only condoms” is an unfortunate reductionism.<sup>4</sup>

The recent upsurge in youth infection rates in Thailand, despite massive promotion of condoms, is consistent with the observed trends in Spain, where STIs are also on the rise despite levels of condom use in young people being the highest in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

If *The Lancet* wants to address the Catholic Pope from a scientific perspective, it might be fair to acknowledge that reputable epidemiological research shows that Church proposals such as those on human sexuality (no intercourse outside marriage and fidelity within marriage), play an important part against STIs. In any case, these are legitimate and respectable choices one can freely accept.

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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- 1 The Lancet. The Pope and science. *Lancet* 2008; **371**: 276.
- 2 Bristol N, Mechai Viravaidya: Thailand's “Condom King”. *Lancet* 2008; **371**: 109.
- 3 Stoneburner RL, Low-beer D. Population-level HIV declines and behavioral risk avoidance in Uganda. *Science* 2004; **304**: 714–17.
- 4 Genuis S. Are condoms the answer to rising rates of non-HIV sexually transmitted infection? *NO. BMJ* 2008; **336**: 185.
- 5 Ross J, Godeau E, Dias S. Sexual health. In: Currie C, Morgan A, eds. Young people's health in context: international report from the HBSC 2001/02 survey. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2004.

I applaud a debate on science and faith<sup>1</sup> because it is reason—our ability to become aware of all reality—that depends on this dialogue. There is a trend to identify reason with the methods of natural sciences, and to dismiss other forms of knowledge as subjective and irrational. However, to approach different questions, our reason needs a variety of methods. For instance, building scientific knowledge on the basis of past research, assumed to be true, is not scientific method: it is faith, an outstanding method of reason, which comes to know reality through a reliable witness.

Issues such as whether a living individual of *Homo sapiens* species in the 14th week of gestation deserves inalienable human rights; or the promotion of abstinence, fidelity, and condoms only for high-risk sex, instead of just encouraging condom use<sup>2</sup> involve not only science, but our global approach to reality, human dignity, and sexuality.

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration