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Vatican broadens case for condoms

> Everyone can use them to prevent HIV, says Catholic Church

VATICAN CITY: Pope Benedict's landmark acknowledgement that condoms are sometimes morally justifiable to stop AIDS can apply to anyone – gays, heterosexuals and transsexuals – if that is the only option to avoid transmitting the HIV virus to others, the Vatican said on Tuesday.

The clarification, which some moral theologians called “groundbreaking”, was the latest step in what is already seen as a significant shift in Catholic Church policy.

It came at a news conference to launch the pope's new book, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Sign of the Times*.

In the book, a long interview with German Catholic journalist Peter Seewald, the pope made clear he was not changing the Catholic ban on contraception, but, using the example of a male prostitute, said there were cases where using a condom to avoid transmitting the HIV virus could be justified.

Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi made the clarification because the German, English and French versions of the book used the male article when referring to a prostitute, but the

Italian version used the female form.

“I asked the pope personally if there was a serious distinction in the choice of male instead of female and he said ‘No,’” Lombardi said.

“The point is it (condom use) should be a first step towards responsibility in being aware of the risk of the life of the other person one has relations with.

“If it is a man, a woman or a transsexual who does it, we are always at the same point, which is the first step in responsibly avoiding passing on a grave risk to the other.”

Theologians, AIDS activists and liberal Catholics said the latest developments marked a highly significant, perhaps even historic, change in the Church's attitude to condoms.

“The pope's statement ... is a startling and welcome shift by the Vatican that has the potential to save tens of thousands of lives,” said Dr Paul Zeitz, executive director of the Washington-based Global AIDS Alliance.

“The pope has created the possibility of rapid change in the way the Catholic Church views HIV/AIDS and how it can preserve the sanctity of human life.”

Lombardi appeared to take the debate beyond the confines of prostitution in the context of fighting the transmission of AIDS, although the church prefers measures such as abstinence.

“The fact that an official Vatican spokesperson seems to be extending the possibility of use clearly is groundbreaking,” said Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, a professor of social ethics at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. – Reuters