

“Tell me where I can find the condom!” Catholic AIDS discourses in South Africa during the 1990s

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Introduction

During the 1990s, the Catholic Church in South Africa was learning new ways of speaking about HIV and AIDS. It is worth noting, however, that the Catholic voice on HIV and AIDS was only one among several other religious discourses in the country. During the mid-1990s, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) convened several national and regional workshops to encourage churches to work together in programmes on HIV/AIDS.¹

The Salvation Army was probably the church with the most developed programme in the area of training and care with services such as the “Drop in Centre Oasis” in Mayfair and the Fred Clarke Home in Soweto for abandoned children whose parents had AIDS.² The Scripture Union also had training materials which were used for youths in schools. Besides having a Total Health Care Committee in Johannesburg and a central co-ordinator for HIV and AIDS ministry, the Methodist Church was running an AIDS Centre at Hillcrest in Natal which was opened in 1991 by Reverend Neil Oosthuizen.³ The Rhema Church, the Baptist Church, and the International Fellowship of Christian Churches collaborated in a systematic programme of training personnel in HIV and AIDS education and counselling under the auspices of the Churches AIDS Programme (CAP).⁴ Therefore, the South Africa Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), CAP, and the SACC were familiar voices to South Africans and the government as far as churches’ discourses on HIV and AIDS were concerned.

In this article, I attempt to analyse how the Catholic Church spoke about HIV and AIDS and how that discourse influenced South African society during the 1990s. I rely on interviews conducted between 2007 and 2010 as well as archival material collected in Catholic archives such as that of the SACBC in Khanya House, Pretoria; that of St Joseph Theological Institute in Pietermaritzburg; as well

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1. Dr J.H.O. Pretorius’ report at a workshop on AIDS held by Religious Bodies and the Department of Health on 29 May 1995 at Civitas Building, Struben Street, Pretoria, South Africa, on 29 May 1995.
2. Report presented at a workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.
3. See www.hillHIV/AIDS.org.za (accessed on 23 August 2008).
4. Churches AIDS Programme (CAP) is an organisation that was officially formed in August 1991 when a group of 15 evangelical churches joined to explore a co-operative response to HIV and AIDS. After hiring Ms Corrine Hendry as the national co-ordinator, the organisation set out to address and equip the body of Christ to deal with the very real and serious HIV pandemic and the immediate problem of AIDS by seeking to reach every Church member with a view to their becoming aware, educated and trained in HIV/AIDS information and care. See Rev. D. Palos, “Response of Churches to AIDS”, Unpublished paper delivered at the workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.

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as that of the Archdiocese of Durban. The *Southern Cross*, a Catholic popular magazine published twice a year, was also particularly helpful.

Prevention discourses: condoms as an option

During the 1990s, there was a thriving condom debate that permeated all levels of the Catholic Church such as the hierarchy (SACBC, the bishops and parish priests), the religious (communities, convents, monks and nuns), and the lay (Catholic projects, commissions). The debate was about the use of condoms as an option in preventing the spread of the HI virus. A sanction on the use of condoms posed a major threat to the church's long held doctrine against the use of contraceptives, a naturalistic view of the conjugal act. The church's official position remained unchanged in the 1990s. The Catholic Church's *Pastoral Letter* released in January 1990 set the pace. It read as follows:

Certain medical authorities and governments advocate using the condom as a preventive against the spread of AIDS. However, condoms are not always reliable, and if a person persists in sexual promiscuity, he or she will still be at great risk of contracting HIV/AIDS even when using a condom. Furthermore, if an attitude of accepting that sex is now safe prevails, then the condom message can increase rather than decrease the incidence of AIDS.⁵

In 1995, the associate secretary general of the SACBC, Father Emil Blaser, explained that the Catholic Church was opposed to all use of the condom. He made it clear to the *Sowetan* newspaper in writing:

Condoms are usually used as contraceptives and as a preventive measure to the possible passing on of AIDS. In both cases the Catholic Church is against the use of condoms. It teaches that sexual intercourse may take place only within marriage. Efforts should rather be made to encourage a change in lifestyle. The promotion of condoms encourages promiscuity and this heightens the risk of contracting AIDS.⁶

On 28 February 1999 the bishops reiterated the same position following a distribution of free condoms by the government in its “safe sex” campaign.⁷ Despite the heated public debate on this Catholic official position, there was a general reluctance on the side of the hierarchy, bishops and priests alike, to engage publicly on the issue of condoms.

This mode of silence was a common denominator to all the churches especially in matters relating to sexuality. Reverend D. Palos of the Churches Aid Programme told the AIDS workshop that met in Pretoria on 29 May 1995 (a joint venture between the Department of Health and religious leaders) that:

Certain churches have avoided addressing directly issues such as sex education and prevention of pregnancy and, most notably, the Catholic Church's position on

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5. South African Catholic Bishops Conference (hereafter SACBC), *A Pastoral Letter on AIDS* (SACBC, Pretoria, 1990), p 4.
 6. SACBC, Correspondence, Letter from Emil Blaser (associate secretary general) to Lulama Luki, *The Sowetan*, 13 February 1995.
 7. SACBC, “Statement on Condoms”, 12 February 1999. See also, “Restraint not Condoms will Beat AIDS: Bishops”, *Southern Cross*, 28 February 1999.

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birth control represents only one element in a general resistance to proposals of limiting risk by the wide scale and free provision of condoms.⁸

This workshop was the second attempt by the government of South Africa, certainly the first by the democratically elected government, to draw in religious organisations and formulate with them a concerted HIV and AIDS response. An attempt by the Department of National Health and Population Development in 1991 to bring religious organisations and different faiths together under an umbrella programme called the Religious AIDS Programme (RAP) had faltered.⁹ Evidence is overwhelming that the condoms controversy became a central factor in the demise of the RAP.¹⁰ According to Reverend Palos, the RAP member churches categorically distanced themselves from the Catholic Church’s position during the May 1995 workshop: “The specific problems, as alluded to before, regarding the promotion of safer sex through the use of condoms will have to be faced by this [Catholic] Church”.¹¹ Both mainline churches and the evangelical churches seemed to settle for a compromised position “whereby condoms could be seen as an option in HIV prevention”.¹² They went ahead to urge the Catholic Church in South Africa to consider an East African Catholic’s parallel position – the formula adopted by the Catholic Church in East Africa – that “anything used to preserve life is legitimate; anything used to prevent life is not”.¹³

The RAP had expected that the SACBC would consider a compromise position with regard to the use of condoms. Episcopal conferences around the world had taken different positions in this regard. Philippe Denis has described two positions adopted by Catholic bishops in sub-Saharan Africa, namely hard line condemnation and tacit condoning.¹⁴ In view of the global spectrum, three distinct positions emerged. Firstly, various national bishops conferences such as those of Germany,¹⁵ Burundi¹⁶ Ireland and England,¹⁷ aligned themselves with the Holy See¹⁸ in publicly *condemning* the use of condoms. Secondly, a few other conferences publicly *condoned* the use of condoms under what some have called

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8. Palos, “Response of Churches to AIDS”, Unpublished paper delivered at the workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.
 9. SACBC, Correspondence, a faxed letter from Emil Blaser (associate secretary general) to Sandile Swana (Hallmark), 24 May 1996 on the subject of the Interfaith Groups on Religious AIDS Project (RAP).
 10. SACBC, Correspondence, faxed letter from Blaser to Swana, 24 May 1996 on subject of RAP.
 11. SACBC, Report on a workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.
 12. SACBC, Report on a workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.
 13. SACBC, Report on a workshop on AIDS, Pretoria, 29 May 1995.
 14. P. Denis and C. Becker (eds), *L'épidémie du sida en Afrique subsaharienne : Regards historiens* (Karthala, Paris, 2006). This publication is also available in English online under the title, *The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Historical Perspective*. See the Sinomlando Center for Oral History and Memory Work at www.sorat.ukzn.ac.za/sinomlando/publications.html (accessed on 30 March 2007).
 15. “Germany’s anti-AIDS Campaign Faulted”, *Southern Cross*, 22 February 1987.
 16. P. Kocheleff, “Le sida au Burundi et en Afrique du Sud: le vécu au quotidien”, in Denis and Becker, *L'épidémie du sida en Afrique subsaharienne*, p 199. For an online English translation see www.refer.sn/rds/IMG/pdf/14KOCHELEFF.pdf (accessed on 29 August 2008).
 17. “Germany’s anti-AIDS Campaign Faulted”, *Southern Cross*, 22 February 1987.
 18. Pope Rejects Condoms as AIDS Prevention”, *Natal Witness*, 11 March 1988.

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“the principle of toleration”.¹⁹ For instance, the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) in 1987 tolerated the use of condoms in HIV prevention in its famous *The Many Faces of AIDS: a Gospel Response*.²⁰ Cardinal Lustiger of Paris said openly in December 1988 that “one cannot ever pass on death and so anyone who cannot abstain from sex should use a condom”.²¹ His view contrasted sharply with that of Carlo Caffara who spoke on “AIDS: General Ethical Aspects” at the AIDS conference held at the Vatican in December 1989.²²

Father Michael Kelly of Zambia challenged the SACBC to consider this position during an Interdiocesan AIDS Conference held at Johannesburg between 16 and 18 July 1993.²³ Citing the Zambian model, he contested that “in fact the Church should teach that it is a greater evil to fornicate without a condom as one risks passing on HIV”.²⁴ He equated the Catholic Church’s fear of being seen to condone sex outside marriage to “Pilate’s awkward washing of hands” over the trial of Jesus! He argued that “there is probably more sex taking place outside marriage than in marriage on any single night” and that the church’s teachings about conjugal love and its openness to new life cannot be applied to sexual intercourse outside marriage. He concluded that:

to get people to use condoms in a context such as Lusaka where sero-prevalence rates of 36.8 percent have been found among pregnant women, is surely a legitimate goal for the state and other NGOs concerned with the AIDS epidemic and the AIDS prevention.²⁵

Lastly, certain conferences chose to remain utterly *silent* on the matter. A typical example is the Congolese bishops’ “Message aux fidèles”, which in April 1996 outlined the church’s position on AIDS and conveniently avoided mentioning the word “condom”.²⁶ Therefore, although the official Catholic position was to condemn the use of condoms, there were variations in the bishops’ utterances on condoms in HIV prevention.

If the SACBC hierarchy publicly opposed the use of condoms during the 1990s, other levels of the institutional church were more open to it as an alternative option to abstinence to prevent further HIV spread. Several Catholic nurses, for instance, supported the use of condoms in HIV prevention. Liz Towell²⁷

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19. J.D. Fuller and J.F. Keenan, “Introduction: At the End of the First Generation of HIV Prevention”, in J.F. Keenan (ed.), *Catholic Ethicists on HIV Prevention* (Continuum, New York, 2000), pp 21–38.
 20. USCC Administrative Board, “The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response”, *Origins*, 17, 28, 1987, pp 482–89.
 21. “AIDS: Church under Fire”, *Southern Cross*, 15 December 1988.
 22. C. Caffara, “AIDS: General Ethical Aspects”, Unpublished paper presented at the AIDS Conference held at the Vatican, December 1989.
 23. Father M. Kelly, “The Dilemma of the Church in Responding to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic”, Unpublished paper presented at the Inter-diocesan AIDS Conference, Johannesburg, South Africa, 16–18 July 1993.
 24. Kelly, “The Dilemma of the Church in Responding to HIV/AIDS Epidemic”.
 25. Kelly, “The Dilemma of the Church in Responding to HIV/AIDS Epidemic”, pp 12 and 13.
 26. Gruénais, “La religion préserve-t-elle du sida”, p 672, cited by P. Denis, “AIDS and Religion in sub-Saharan Africa in Historical Perspective”, Paper delivered at an International AIDS Symposium in Copenhagen, 21 April 2008, p 14.
 27. Liz Towell, Interview conducted by the author (digital recording), Amanzimtoti, 10 July 2008.

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and Sabbath Mlambo²⁸ of Durban’s Sinosizo project admitted to having recommended the use of condoms in the 1990s. In no uncertain terms, Towell indicated that they were not the only ones distributing condoms. She observed further that other Catholic nurses in Johannesburg were doing exactly the same. They knew that they were going against the official position of the SACBC. She narrated what follows:

Well, the condom was not accepted by the church, no matter what time it was. However, when you work in the field ... I used to distribute the condoms without any bother at all. Archbishop Hurley knew I did. He also understood why I did it. [However]... it became more difficult with Cardinal Napier. But yeah, we promoted that. All our staff used to have condoms. We would get them from the government and distribute them to the areas. And so that was the main prevention because there was no other prevention method that was available. They were not going to abstain. That was like asking too much. So yeah that was all we did. Rightly or wrongly, it was up to us. I could not have lived with my conscience knowing that I did not give some kind of protection to somebody to save a life. Because that is what it was all about.²⁹

According to Towell, although Sinosizo was a Catholic project, it did nothing to promote the official Catholic position on HIV prevention. At least not during the chairmanship of Archbishop Hurley who, unlike his successor, Cardinal Napier, condoned the use and distribution of condoms³⁰

Similarly, social workers in Mariannhill did not follow the SACBC’s “zero tolerance” policy on condom use. Jennifer Booysen, a pioneering social worker in AIDS care and treatment at Mariannhill was very candid about this: “I never felt I was held back by the church policies. I knew the policies were out there, but when it came to saving lives we had options ... the programmes were very real”.³¹ She maintained that although “the [Catholic] Church was consistent in abstinence as a prevention method” and that “sometimes we used to invite a priest to speak from his theological position, we knew there was access to these things [condoms]”.³² A similar position was advocated by Dr Douglas Ross at St Mary’s Hospital. Their stance on prevention as a Catholic hospital has always been clear to patients: “Here is the Catholic preference, [but] there are other options too”.³³ According to Sister Bikina, although the key prevention message at the iThemba Clinic was “don’t sleep around”, they would often recommend the use of condoms.³⁴

The interplay between the hierarchy and the lay leaders became clearer in the case of the Eshowe diocese where the two church levels were equally involved in responding to the AIDS pandemic. Father Gérard T. Lagleder had a great deal to say on why in the 1990s he “urged AIDS patients to use a condom if they had no choice to abstain from sex”, and why he as a Catholic priest still did not

28. S. Mlambo, Interview conducted by author (digital recording), Greytown, 11 July 2008.

29. Towell, Interview conducted by author, Amanzimtoti, 9 July 2008.

30. Towell, Interview conducted by author, Amanzimtoti, 9 July 2008.

31. Jennifer Booysen, Interview conducted by author (digital recording), St Mary’s Hospital, Mariannhill, 23 November 2007.

32. Booysen, Interview conducted by author, Mariannhill, 23 November 2007.

33. Bikina Neil and Douglas Ross, Interview conducted by author (digital recording), Interview conducted at St Mary’s Hospital in Mariannhill, 15 October 2007.

34. Neil and Ross, Interview conducted by author, Mariannhill, 15 October 2007.

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consider this to be a contradiction to the teaching of the Catholic Church.³⁵ However, he made it clear that “as a Catholic scholar and leader, it is my position to fully and totally subscribe to the teaching of the Catholic Church”.³⁶ Undoubtedly, Father Lagleder struggled with this prevention dilemma where, on the one hand, he was asked to obey his bishop and to follow the official position of the SACBC, but on the other hand, he felt compelled by the enormous realities to recommend the use of condoms.

By and large, there was a disconnection between “the ideal” as expounded by the hierarchy and “the reality” as experienced by the practitioners who were in most cases the lay leaders and, in some cases, the religious leaders. That dilemma was most felt by the lay leaders who worked for the SACBC AIDS Office. In May 1995, for instance, Chris Matubatuba, the SACBC Aids Office co-ordinator, lamented: “They [the bishops] said use your discretion and then they fired me!”³⁷ A year later, his successor, Linda Maepa, indicated in her annual report on the use of condoms that the “bothersome thing is that all questions eventually find their way to the SACBC AIDS co-ordinator”.³⁸ She complained that queries about condoms “come even from priests who are themselves bombarded with questions”.³⁹ Similar sentiments were echoed by Cecilia Moloantoa, the secretary of the Health Care and Education Department of the SACBC,⁴⁰ as well as Beauty Maletle of CATHCA.⁴¹ Evidently, a debate over the use of condoms as an alternative option in HIV prevention was thriving apart from the church hierarchy. Indeed, Catholic lay leaders such as nurses, doctors and social workers were silently defiant of the hierarchy’s position vis-à-vis condom use.

Pressure was mounting from the lower levels of the church for the hierarchy to reconsider its position on the use of condoms. This translated into a categorical and publicly stated departure from the SACBC’s position by certain bishops such as Kevin Dowling at the turn of the century. This was followed by the controversial bishops’ “Message of Hope” which totally shattered the highly anticipated sanction of the use of condoms in HIV prevention. Nevertheless, by 1999, the bishops were succumbing to the demands from within and outside the church, and plans were underway towards the release of a new pastoral letter on HIV and AIDS.⁴²

Sex education discourses

Several scholars have rightly observed that the Catholic Church has been influenced by HIV and AIDS to a great extent even as it attempted to respond to the epidemic.⁴³ This was especially so in the areas of sexuality and sex education.

35. Gerard Lagleder, Interview conducted by author (telephonic), 10 October 2007.

36. Lagleder, Telephonic interview conducted by author, 10 October 2007.

37. “AIDS Worker Learns about Catholics and Condoms”, *The Star*, 20 May 1995.

38. SACBC AIDS Office, Annual Report 1996, prepared by L. Maepa, p 23.

39. SACBC AIDS Office, Annual Report 1996, p 23.

40. SACBC, AIDS Awareness Programme, Report to CAFOD, 1993/94, prepared by C. Matubatuba, the inter-diocesan AIDS co-ordinator.

41. SACBC, Minutes of the plenary meeting held at St Peter’s Seminary, Pretoria, 20–27 January 1999.

42. SACBC, Minutes of the plenary session, St Peter’s Seminary, Pretoria, 20–27 January 1999.

43. Most notably, Charles Ryan and Alison Munro. See C. Ryan, “AIDS and Responsibility: The Catholic Tradition”, pp 4 and 5; and A. Munro, “Stigma and Discrimination”. These

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It would appear that during the 1990s, HIV and AIDS *confronted* the church’s official teachings more than it was actually confronted by the church. It was in this area, more than any other, that the Catholic Church felt most embarrassed, exposed and criticised. AIDS activists accused the Catholic Church of being a hindrance in HIV prevention campaigns on account of its sex education policy. It makes sense therefore that the church’s statements on sex and sexuality during this period were openly *defensive*, often *ambivalent*, and characteristically very *passive*. Let us examine some of these statements more closely in Table 1 below.

Table 1: AIDS articles from 1991 to 1999 in the *News and Bulletin of the Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*⁴⁴

Date	Title	Summary
June 1992	“Catholic AIDS Care Programme: Youth Trainers Programme”	The Catholic AIDS Care Committee of the Archdiocese of Durban, chaired by Archbishop Denis Hurley, has been actively developing a training programme aimed at preventing the spread of AIDS among youth. Objectives include bringing in representatives from the parishes and exploring various issues relating to HIV/AIDS within the context of the church’s teaching in South Africa. The training covers topics such as AIDS the disease; human sexuality and attitudes; AIDS prevention; and how to give this information back to the youth.
October 1992	“AIDS Care Committee: Youth Programmes 1992”	The AIDS Care Committee for the Archdiocese of Durban has put together a programme for 1992. This year we will be focusing on the youth. Rather than go around and provide repetitive programmes we have developed a training course for youth educators (i.e. all people in parish involved in some form of education – catechism teachers, confirmation class teachers, etc.) This programme is being provided at Deanery level.
December 1996	“AIDS Care Committee”	The AIDS Care Committee of the Archdiocese of Durban calls for applications for two nursing posts in its Home Care Programme.
August 1997	“Anti-AIDS Campaign”	In the past few years the KwaZulu-Natal Church Leaders Group (KNCLG) has been networking with other concerned groups to address the alarmingly rapid and consistent spread of AIDS. Together with the leadership in the political, business and academic sectors, the KNCLG held a number of information gathering and sharing meetings on the situation of AIDS in the province. It held a Bosberaad at Mooi River from 25-27 June 1997. As a result of that conference, a report-back and forward planning meeting is scheduled at Musgrave Road

were both papers written for an e-mail forum ahead of the UNAIDS Consultation under the rubric “Advocacy for Action on Stigma and HIV/AIDS in Africa”, held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2001. See also Philippe Denis’s personal notes from his public lecture, “Faith Based Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa”, Presented at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 4 October 2008.

44. The information on the table was gleaned from the following articles: “Catholic AIDS Care Programme: Youth Trainers Programme”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 280, June 1992, pp 48–49; “AIDS Care Committee: Youth Programmes 1992”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 284, October 1992, p 86; “AIDS Care Committee”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 330, December 1996, p 98; “Anti-AIDS Campaign”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 337, August 1997, p 45; “Christmas, a Time of Hope”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 352, December 1998, p 73.

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		Methodist Church on 3 Sept. 1997. Each church is to bring 15-20 representatives who are committed to tackling the AIDS issue with determination. It was therefore a Godsend to have “True Love Waits” organise a special action on Saturday 9 August at the City Hall.
December 1998	“Christmas, a Time of Hope”	As the year draws to a close one cannot help noting that 1988 was not the best of years. Among other things the moral decay in public and social life, but particularly the HIV/AIDS crisis has brought down on us a cloud of disillusionment and hopelessness. So much so that many people are asking: “What is there to celebrate at Christmas?”

The *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*⁴⁵ is a monthly publication that is freely available to parishioners within the Archdiocese of Durban parishes. It relays local messages and information relevant to the archdiocese within the one month period. The contents of its eight pages customarily include the archbishop’s keynote message for the month ahead, advertisements on various programmes, activities and employment vacancies. It is therefore a reliable communication channel between the leadership and the parishioners. It is a fair reflection of the state of the archdiocese in various orientations such as devotions, catechism, and social activities as well as vocational and leadership training. Between 1990 and 1999, there were only five AIDS-related notices or articles. These are summarised in Table 1 above.

According to the *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban* articles, the archdiocese of Durban was actively training its leaders on the subject of HIV and AIDS during the early 1990s. These leaders were expected to teach what they had learnt when providing instruction in the catechism and working among the youth in various forums. The training was provided by members of the AIDS Care Committee such as Liz Towell and Sabbath Mlambo, upon invitation by the archbishop and the deaneries. The emphasis during the early years, similar to that of the SACBC, was on awareness. The training did not reach the parish level in the 1990s, although there were efforts to train at diocese and deanery levels. This training flourished up until 1992⁴⁶ but then disappeared and were not heard of again during the rest of the 1990s.

In 1997 it appears that the Catholic Church collaborated with other faith-based organisations in the province to organise a concerted religious response on the issue of AIDS. For instance, the KwaZulu-Natal Church Leaders Group (KNCLG) held “a number of information gathering and sharing meetings on the situation of AIDS in the province” in that year.⁴⁷ For example it held a conference at Mooi River from 25 to 27 June 1997 and “a report-back and forward planning meeting” at Musgrave Road Methodist Church in Durban on 3 September 1997.⁴⁸ According to Patrick Kearney, the director of Diakonia, who not only worked

45. In 1989, the magazine changed its name from the *Bulletin of the Archdiocese of Durban* to the *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*.

46. “Durban AIDS Course Enthusiasm”, *Southern Cross*, 13 September 1992.

47. “Anti-AIDS Campaign”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 337, August 1997, p 45.

48. “Anti-AIDS Campaign”, *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban*, 337, August 1997, p 45.

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closely with the archbishop in the 1980s but also interviewed him several times, the Durban-based Diakonia Fellowship,⁴⁹ of which Archbishop Hurley was an executive member, was also running some AIDS exposure meetings in the late 1990s.⁵⁰ These para-church initiatives did not translate into programmes during the 1990s; however they mushroomed into projects during the 2000s.

That only five of the 108 *News and Bulletin of Catholic Archdiocese of Durban* (1991-1999) publications mentioned AIDS is indicative of the archdiocese's hesitance in talking about the disease. Liz Towell also testified to this hesitant attitude.⁵¹ She had memories of difficult experiences in her talks to priests about HIV and AIDS. As the co-ordinator of the archdiocese's AIDS programme, she was often invited by Archbishop Hurley to speak to groups of priests in Durban and at the deaneries. To her amazement, the priests were very reluctant to discuss, or even engage with the subject. In one such workshop held in Durban in 1996, Hurley intervened and asked the priests to feel free to ask any manner of questions and comment on anything they wished to raise. Astonishingly, even then the priests remained silent and far-removed. According to Towell, the workshop was an utter failure. Apparently, the 1990 move by the top leadership of the church at the SACBC level to respond to HIV and AIDS was not immediately reciprocated by the lower levels such as the deaneries and the parishes. In other words the AIDS debates that flourished in the 1990s among bishops, seminary principals, and religious superiors did not become popular among ordinary parish priests.

Catholic discourses on prevention characteristically targeted young people. There was an underlying assumption that people of the older age group were “immune”, or even, safer than the youth. Marital relationships were seen to be a “safe haven” where AIDS would not easily penetrate. This explains why in the few times the church spoke about AIDS it did so in the context of warning young people against sexual sinfulness. Catholic AIDS programmes were exclusively targeted at the youth. This was well depicted in the “True Love Waits” programme. Supported by the SACBC, the programme spread through the dioceses with the primary aim of convincing the young people to abstain from sexual intercourse until they were married. There were no such programmes for married women and men. It appears that in the 2000s the pendulum swung from overemphasis on the youth to people in abusive relationships, particularly women and children.

Catholic prevention discourses in the 1990s continued to be morally judgemental. Religious leaders, bishops, priests, and catechists openly condemned technical interventions such as the use of condoms. They championed moral measures in HIV prevention. Meanwhile, Catholic doctors, nurses, and social workers discreetly promoted the use of condoms. In Mariannhill, the Catholic social workers running the AIDS programme for the department of Home and Family Life started using the analogy of “three boats and

49. Diakonia Fellowship is a council of churches within the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

50. Patrick Kearney, interview by author (digital recording) at Pietermaritzburg, 20 August 2008. Kearney, who is fondly referred to as “Paddy”, was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2011.

51. Towell, Interview conducted by author, Amanzimtoti, 9 July 2008.

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a drowning village” in 1996.⁵² This analogy had become very popular in East Africa by 1995.⁵³ It was part of the famous prevention campaign known as ABC – Abstain, Be faithful, and Condomise. The analogy was first used in 1994 by Bernard Joinet, a Catholic priest serving in Tanzania.⁵⁴ In the analogy, individual members of the drowning village had to decide which of the three boats they would use in order to survive the catastrophe. According to Booyesen, they insisted in their workshops that “people can change from one boat to another. There are times to cross from one boat condition to another, i.e. from abstinence to condom use, for instance”.⁵⁵ Apparently, Booyesen and her colleagues in the Mariannhill diocese had learned to live with the two extremes, the moral ideal advocated by the Catholic Church hierarchy and the technical intervention popularised by the government. The analogy helped them resolve this contradiction. “Sometimes we used a priest – to speak from his theological position”, Booyesen explained, “however, as practitioners we knew there was access to these things [condoms]”.⁵⁶

Similarly, Catholic nurses in Durban distributed and encouraged the use of condoms. Liz Towell and Sabbath Mlambo attested to this. It must have been an awkward position for the priests to be asked by their archbishop to engage in a workshop on sex with the nurses. The priests knew that the nurses had contravened the church’s official teachings. Archbishop Denis Hurley was suggesting that they ask the nurses these “awkward” questions. It is in Durban, therefore, that this contradiction on the part of the church organs became most pronounced. The retirement of Hurley, who condoned the use of condoms, and the subsequent installation of Napier, who sternly condemned the use of condoms, led to major power and policy shifts in relation to AIDS ministry within the diocese, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The discourse was somewhat different in the Eshowe diocese. Contrary to many other KwaZulu-Natal dioceses, in Eshowe the AIDS ministry was spearheaded by religious and not lay persons. The Blessed Gérard Care Centre; the Franciscan Nardini Sisters; and the Benedictine Sisters of Twasana, were the key pioneers in AIDS education. Father Gérard Lagleder, the president of the Blessed Gérard Care Centre and Hospice, married the two extremes – as a health practitioner, he openly advocated the use of condoms, and as a parish priest, he upheld the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. He not only urged his patients to use condoms in cases where they admitted that they could not abstain but also made them sign a treatment contract with a promise to do so.⁵⁷ Father Lagleder had found a theological motivation for juxtaposing the two extremes. Similar

52. Booyesen, Interview conducted by author, Mariannhill, 23 November 2007.

53. C. Baylies and J. Bujra (eds), *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender in Africa: Collective Strategies and Struggles in Tanzania and Zambia* (Routledge, London and New York, 2000).

54. M. Mbilinyi and N. Kaihula, “Sinners and Outsiders: The Drama of AIDS in Rungwe”, in Baylies and Bujra, *AIDS, Sexuality and Gender in Africa*, pp 76–95. See also B. Joinet, *Survivre face au SIDA en Afrique* (Karthala, Paris, 1994); and also Denis, “AIDS and Religion in sub-Saharan Africa”, Paper delivered at International AIDS Symposium in Copenhagen, 21 April 2008.

55. Booyesen, Interview conducted by author, Mariannhill, 23 November 2007.

56. Booyesen, Interview conducted by author, Mariannhill, 23 November 2007.

57. Lagleder, Telephonic interview conducted by author, 10 October 2007.

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sentiments were expressed by Sister Priscilla Dlamini, the sister who ran the Benedictine Sisters Holy Cross AIDS Hospice.⁵⁸

In Dundee, sex education discourses drew mixed reactions among parishioners. The conflicting messages between the church and the government position created much pandemonium and confusion. Sister Immaculata Ndlovu spoke of a woman who thought that the condom was a cure-all intervention which, like a magic bullet, could fix all her family's sexual disorders. She stormed into the convent one evening with two of her children, her 12-year-old son and her younger daughter, and exclaimed – “tell me where I can find the condom!” She went ahead to explain that she had discovered that the boy was sexually assaulting his younger sister. The mother wanted access to the condom which she was convinced would prevent the boy from repeating this behaviour. According to Sister Immaculata,⁵⁹ the government was to blame for the confusion the young mother, and presumably others like her, were experiencing.

Arguably, the standoff between the government and the Catholic Church as far as HIV prevention methods are concerned may not be solely to blame for the conflicting messages on HIV prevention. The above story illustrates that the government's approach of “all-condom” was not good enough; a multi-level approach to HIV prevention might have been more fruitful. The government's revision of its position from safe sex campaign (condoms only) to the safer sex campaign (the ABC methods) in 1999 was a necessary step in this direction.⁶⁰ The Catholic Church was, however, equally guilty in that it spoke with “two different tongues” when it came to HIV prevention. On the one hand, the religious and the hierarchy condemned condoms and upheld abstinence as the only safe method of HIV prevention. On the other hand, the lay leaders, nurses, doctors and care givers, encouraged and even promoted the use of condoms. This ambivalence did more damage than good in the church's response to the epidemic.

It seems likely that much more harm, particularly on the public's trust in the interests of the Catholic Church, resulted from the church's defensive statements. Most of the sex education statements made by Catholic clerics in the 1990s concerning HIV or AIDS were not specifically aimed at checking the escalating spread of the epidemic but rather on exonerating the church from a perceived public attack. The church became more concerned with defending its teachings rather than in engaging the public in an open answer-searching dialogue. Charles Ryan has called this phenomenon the “we told you so attitude”,⁶¹ whereas Kenneth Kearon described it as “a strong undercurrent of ‘we warned you’, ‘we were right all along’”.⁶² A good example is the attempt by the church to discredit the effectiveness of condom use in HIV prevention against a cloud of scientific witness. Its position can be summarised into three statements which were repeatedly made by clerics, although not always using the exact words.

58. Priscilla Dlamini, Telephonic interview conducted by author, 10 December 2008.

59. Sister Immaculata, Interview conducted by author (digital recording) at the bishop's offices in Dundee, 15 September 2007.

60. “Restraint not Condoms will Beat AIDS: Bishops”, *Southern Cross*, 28 February 1999.

61. Ryan, “AIDS and Responsibility: The Catholic Tradition”, pp 4 and 5.

62. K. Kearon, *Medical Ethics: An Introduction* (Columba Press, Dublin, 1999), p 117.

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The *first* of these statements was that the use of condoms promotes promiscuous behaviour. The SACBC’s *Pastoral Statement on AIDS* stated categorically that “the condom message can increase rather than decrease the incidence of AIDS”.⁶³ Zambian bishops candidly stated that “the condom is immoral and destructive of the dignity of a person”.⁶⁴ Vatican officials maintained “that condom-based ‘safe sex’ campaigns end up promoting sexual immorality without eliminating the risk”.⁶⁵ In the same vein, Archbishop Buti Tlhagale of Bloemfontein contested that “the acceptance of condom use will simply turn the church’s traditional teaching on sexual ethics on its head”.⁶⁶ In a 1999 pastoral letter, Archbishop Lawrence Henry of Cape Town agreed, saying that condom use did not guarantee protection from AIDS but was equivalent to entering into a deadly game of Russian roulette.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Father Francois Dufour, the Johannesburg episcopal vicar for the youth, denounced the “safer sex” message promoted by the government. In an article that appeared in the monthly diocesan youth newsletter, the *Catholic Y Link*, Dufour warned against the Department of Education’s decision to distribute condoms at schools saying that it amounted to funding sexual promiscuity.⁶⁸ In a brief SACBC statement released in February 1999, the bishops reiterated that providing more condoms would not prevent the spread of AIDS because it would undoubtedly encourage promiscuity.⁶⁹ The evidence is overwhelming that clerics continued to condemn the use of condoms, both as a contraceptive and as a prevention method, and regarded it as a sign of sexual promiscuity in the society.

Part of the problem for the church as far as sex education was concerned was that all too often artificial means of birth control and a means of preventing the spread of infection were talked about as if they were the same thing. Alison Munro, the co-ordinator of the SACBC AIDS Office, concurs that a great deal of emotion and negative energy was “so often expended by everyone trying to explain and justify a position”, rather than proclaiming “our message positively”.⁷⁰ She told Catholic theologians and AIDS activists that “the AIDS public is often outraged when the church, or some people in it at least, appears to believe that condom use promotes promiscuous behaviour”.⁷¹ In her view the church’s unabated condemnation of the use of condoms stirred confusion, anger, and guilt among the public. It blurred the obvious message that condoms had a place in the prevention of the spread of HIV infection, as opposed to contraception, especially in cases where people engaged in risky sexual practices.

The *second* category of the Catholic Church’s anti-condom use statements was that condoms have holes “bigger than the size of an HI virus” and therefore

63. SACBC, *Pastoral Letter on AIDS*, p 8.

64. Zambian Catholic Bishops, December 2002, posted by afAIDS@healthdev.net, 19 December 2002.

65. “Just How Safe is ‘Safe Sex’?”, *Southern Cross*, 26 October 1997.

66. B. Tlhagale, “Condoms and the Church’s Moral Teachings”, personal notes, undated. The citations in the paper are up to and including the year 2000.

67. “AIDS Support Must Grow”, *Southern Cross*, 25 January 1998.

68. F. Dufour, “Condom Strategy a Failure”, *Catholic Y Link*, 67, September 1999, pp 4–7.

69. “Restraint Not Condoms will Beat AIDS: Bishops”, *Southern Cross*, 28 February 1999.

70. A. Munro, “Responsibility: The Prevention of HIV/AIDS”, Paper presented at the Third Catholic Theological Conference on HIV/AIDS, St Augustine College, Johannesburg, 5–7 February 2003, pp 22–51.

71. See Munro, “Responsibility: The Prevention of HIV/AIDS”, p 38.

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do not offer the desired protection. In an effort to problematise the use of condoms, the church officials fantasised far too long with the “scientific myth” that the latex used for making condoms has micropores large enough to let through the HI virus. It was not merely the scientific incorrectness of this claim that did much harm; it was rather the uncritical broadcast of it by the church in the name of sex education that dealt a deadly blow in its response to HIV and AIDS. Scientific findings were often and very unhappily played off against values promoted by the church teachings.⁷² Indeed, AIDS related articles that filled the pages of the *Southern Cross* during the 1990s are a vivid demonstration of how the church officials (more especially the bishops) tried to drag scientific evidence into supporting its moral disapproval of the condom use. A case in point is a 37-page article by Father Jacques Suaudeau, a medical doctor and a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family, which was first published in the Rome Catholic Journal, *Medicina e Morale*, in June 1997 and later in the *Southern Cross*.⁷³ Titled “Safe Sex’ and the Condom, Faced with the Challenge AIDS”, it argued that in between 10 and 15 percent of sexual acts, condoms do not prevent transmission of the HIV. The priest’s article raised objections when it spoke about condoms “breaking easily” and having “micropores” which he claimed were big enough to allow the passage of the HIV.

The response was both categorical and strenuous. Fernando Aiuti, an Italian immunologist, asserted that it had been “scientifically proven that pores present in condoms do not allow HIV to pass through”. Vittorio Agnoletto, president of the Italian Anti-AIDS League, dismissed Father Suaudeau’s assertions as “scientific ignorance used for ideological and moralistic purposes”.⁷⁴ Worse still, the sources used by Father Suaudeau in his argument publicly distanced themselves from his conclusions citing misrepresentation in the debate.

That the validity of condom use was more than 98 percent when used properly and that condoms had been useful in saving lives was not debatable. The irony in the debate was that the Catholic bishops capitalised on the insignificant failure rate of the condoms to make the point that only abstinence was 100 percent safe and thereby tried to vindicate the church’s teachings. As Jennifer Slater, a Catholic theologian, put it, the question was why moral theologians were so tardy in formulating a responsible response to HIV and AIDS. Why did they keep harping on the futile arguments on the use and non-use of condoms?⁷⁵ This is not to say that the church should have abdicated its role in teaching and witnessing to an authentic ethic of human sexuality in accordance with mankind’s dignity and God’s vocation. However, as Ryan lamented, “the situation ‘in the field’, to which any pastor will testify, dramatically illustrates the failure of the Church in South Africa in conveying to its members”, much less to society at large, “a sexual morality that is both human and dignified”.⁷⁶ Ryan called upon the Catholic Church to correct its motivation for responding to HIV and AIDS, to engage in an

72. Munro, “Responsibility: The Prevention of HIV/AIDS”, p 38.

73. “Just How Safe is ‘Safe Sex’?”, *Southern Cross*, 26 October 1997.

74. “Just How Safe is ‘Safe Sex’?”, *Southern Cross*, 26 October 1997.

75. J. Slater, “Aids and Responsibility: The Catholic Tradition, Response to Charles Ryan”, in S. Bate (ed.), *Responsibility in a Time of AIDS: A Pastoral Response by Catholic Theologians and AIDS Activists in Southern Africa* (Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 2003), pp 19–30.

76. Ryan, “AIDS and Responsibility: The Catholic Tradition”, p 14.

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orchestrated, authentic, and to launch a sustained campaign of sex education that is born out of an acceptance and realisation of failures in the past.⁷⁷

The *third* statement made by the Catholic Church was that the use of condoms is actually the key cause of the increased HIV spread. As early as 1992, articles by clerics that were printed in the *Southern Cross* were blaming the increase of the HIV spread on the government's distribution of condoms.⁷⁸ This continued throughout the 1990s. During my interview with him, Cardinal Napier credited the Ugandan success story in slowing the HIV spread to the country's consolidated “abstinence” message.⁷⁹ In all SACBC statements on AIDS, the bishops have associated the South African government's indiscriminate distribution of condoms to the escalation of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.⁸⁰

Conclusion

For the hierarchy to consistently proclaim that the use of condoms was “part of the problem” when multiple and credible evidence⁸¹ showed that condom-use campaign had drastically reduced the rate of HIV infection in other African countries only tainted further the image of the church, let alone the negative consequences this had on the prevention campaign itself. It is this statement, most especially, that was used by antagonists in their critiques of the Catholic Church to argue that either the church was so naively unaware of the appalling conditions on the ground or it just did not care enough.⁸² Given the magnitude of the AIDS crisis, especially in the late 1990s, it was possible for one to interpret such a statement in that all the church cared for was chastity and obedience to a set of moral directives and not the vulnerable multitude at the margins of the church who were, in one way or another, not in a position to live out those directives.

However, as demonstrated in this article, it was not the entire church hierarchy that kept alive the official position on the use of condoms. The lay leaders in particular, were tactfully deviant. By the end of 1999, there was an enormous amount of pressure on the bishops to reconsider the church's official position on the use of condoms. Bishops such as Kevin Dowling and his retired cousin, Archbishop Hurley, as well as theologians such as Alison Munro and Charles Ryan played a significant role in calling the church into some self-searching initiative vis-à-vis sex education and HIV prevention. However, the most significant pressure came from lay practitioners on ground. This was not unique either to Catholicism or the region, as the research work by Jenny Trinitapoli and Alexander Weinreb on Pentecostalism and East Africa has clearly shown.⁸³

77. Ryan, “AIDS and Responsibility: The Catholic Tradition”, p 14.

78. “AIDS Fight Methods Seen as ‘a Lie’”, *Southern Cross*, 9 August 1992.

79. Cardinal Wilfred Napier, interview (digital recording) conducted by author, Durban, 15 October 2007; and follow-up interview, 14 August 2008.

80. I have in mind four SACBC pastoral statements and letters on AIDS. These were released in 1988, 1990, 1999 and 2002.

81. G. Byamugisha, *Journeys of Faith: Church-based Responses to HIV and AIDS in Three Southern African Countries* (Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 2002). On statistics see L. Clarke's article, “AIDS: A New Helping Hand”, *Sunday Tribute*, 1 December 1999.

82. See K.T. Kelly, *New Directions in Sexual Ethics: Moral Theology and the Challenge of AIDS* (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1998), pp 10–23.

83. J. Trinitapoli and A. Weinreb, *Religion and AIDS in Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012), pp 16–18.

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It was what the church said and how it said it that created controversy, more than anything else. More often than not, the church did not know what to say about HIV and Aids, especially in regard to prevention and the role of condoms, sex and sex education. The church seemed to speak with two juxtaposing voices. Whereas a debate was raging among the laity that considered ‘condoms as an option’ in HIV prevention, the clergy remained adamant on the church’s official position that condemned the use of condoms both as a contraceptive measure and as a technical intervention in HIV prevention. A cloud of ambiguity canvassed the entire subject of sex and sexuality. Apparently, the clergy was embarrassed to speak about sexuality. Whenever it did, it was unnecessarily *defensive*, sometimes *passive*, and generally *ambivalent*. This was depicted in the uneasiness of the clerics in engaging the laity on the subject of HIV prevention, their fruitless attempts to problematise the use of condoms in HIV prevention, and their deadening silence on the church’s concern over the fate of the people, whether inside or outside the zone of church influence, who could neither abstain from sexual intercourse nor remain faithful to one partner.

The position of the Catholic Church in South Africa on condoms during the 1990s as well as the discourse on this controversial topic need not be seen in isolation of the entire historical development of the AIDS debate in the country during the 1980s, 1990s and especially the 2000s. The re-establishment of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC) Aids Office in August 1999⁸⁴ and the subsequent signing of a US\$ 5 million collaboration contract between the SACBC, the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB) and the Bristol Myers Squibb Company (BMS),⁸⁵ set the scene for a new chapter in the Catholic Church’s response to HIV and Aids in South Africa. Whereas it had been envisaged that the collaboration between the three bodies during the five-year contract period would encompass various aspects of the Catholic Church’s response to the pandemic, the use of condoms in HIV prevention took centre stage. The condom debate, which escalated immediately after the signing of this contract and continued unabated throughout the 2000s, was not entirely unrelated to the contract. Its signing was immediately followed by the “Dowling controversy” and the “Message of Hope” which I have discussed at length elsewhere.⁸⁶ Therefore, during the 2000s, the South African Catholic Church’s way of talking about the disease changed considerably as compared to the 1990s. Although the “Message of Hope” dashed the hopes of many in the bishops’ sanctioning of the use of condoms, Catholic moral theologians conferences held at St Augustine College in 2003 (Johannesburg) and at St Joseph Theological Institute (Pietermaritzburg) in 2013 continued to guide the discourse in a more proactive manner. Indeed, as both Ryan and Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator have argued, the trajectory of Catholic responses has stretched from denial and resistance to

84. SACBC, Minutes of the plenary session held at Mariannhill, 5–11 August 1999.

85. Terms of Agreement between the Catholic Medical Mission Board (CMMB) based in New York, and the Southern African Catholic Bishop’s Conference, para 17, revised edition, 11 January 2000.

86. S.M. Joshua, ‘The ‘Dowling Controversy’, the ‘Message of Hope’, and the Principle of Oikonomia: A Historical-critical Reflection on the South African Catholic Church’s Stance on the Use of Condoms in HIV Prevention between 2000 and 2005’, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 137, July 2010, pp 4–27.

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conversion and engagement via moments of stigmatisation and marginalisation, compassion and care for people living with AIDS.⁸⁷

Abstract

Imagine a male celibate priest trying to talk about sex and AIDS to a church congregation whose majority is women! It is naturally embarrassing and challenging. This is the situation that most Catholic lay, religious, and the hierarchy had to deal with in South Africa during the 1990s. The article is an attempt to use archival and oral history materials collected between 2007 and 2010 to analyse how the Catholic Church spoke about HIV and AIDS and how that discourse influenced South African society during the 1990s. Here I argue that although the church's statements on AIDS, condoms, sex and sexuality during this period were openly defensive, often ambivalent, and characteristically passive, it was what the church said and how it said it that created controversies, more than anything else.

Keywords: HIV and AIDS; Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference; condoms, church history; sex education.

Opsomming

“Vetel my waar ek ‘n kondoom kan kry!” Katolieke VIGS diskoerse in Suid-Afrika tydens die 1990s

Verbeel jou dat ‘n selibate priester probeer praat oor seks en VIGS en die gehoor is ‘n gemeente waarvan die lede grootliks vroue is! Dit is uiteraard uitdagend en vernederend. Dit is die situasie wat die meeste Katolieke leke, gelowiges en die hiërargie mee moes omgaan in Suid-Afrika in die 1990s. Hierdie artikel poog om argivale en orale bronne, versamel tussen 2007 en 2010, te gebruik om te analiseer hoe die Katolieke Kerk oor HIV en VIGS gepraat het en hoe hierdie diskoerse die Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap tydens die tydperk beïnvloed het. Ek argumenteer dat hoewel die kerk se uitsprake oor VIGS, kondome, seks en seksualiteit tydens die periode passief, openlik verdedigend en soms teenstrydig was, was dit wat die kerk gesê het hoe dit gesê is wat meer as enige iets anders wat kontroversies geskep het.

Sleutelwoorde: HIV en VIGS; Suider-Afrikaanse Katolieke Biskoppe Konferensie; kondome, kerk geskiedenis; seks onderrig.

87. A. Orobator, “Catholic Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa within the Theological Category of Conversion”, *Grace and Truth: A Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa*, 30, 2, October/November 2013, pp 30–42.