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French Bishop Supports Some Use of Condoms to Prevent AIDS

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

PARIS, Feb. 12 — The chairman of a French Roman Catholic bishops' committee suggested in a report published today that the use of condoms could be justified in some cases to prevent the spread of AIDS, contradicting the Vatican's general condemnation of most methods of birth control.

"Many competent doctors maintain that a condom of reliable quality is today the only means of prevention," wrote the chairman, Bishop Albert Rouet of Poitiers, in his discussion of the report on AIDS by the

Social Committee of the French episcopate, the highest authority of the church in France on social issues. "As such, it is necessary."

But the bishop was careful to limit the possible moral justification for using physical contraceptives.

He added: "It is appropriate to make distinctions among users, those whose sexual activity is sufficiently enlightened and requires taking precautions against risks; authorities who simply do not know what else to propose, and propagandists of a libertarianism that reduces sexuality to insignificance."

In his discussion, appended to the

committee's report and intended, it says, for all Roman Catholics, the bishop also warned of the importance of balancing "the avoidance of serious risk" of AIDS by using a condom with the church's view that "it is not a proper means of education into adult sexuality."

Though the 235 pages of Bishop Rouet's discussion and the committee's report, called "AIDS: Society in Question," broadly conformed to the church's emphasis on abstinence and its condemnation of most birth control, several experts in France and abroad found the bishop's assertion that condom use could ever be

justified as an important break with the official Roman Catholic position.

An administrative board of American Roman Catholic bishops approved the mention of condoms in AIDS education programs in 1987, but John Cardinal O'Connor of New York later called the statement "a grave mistake," and a later statement by the full conference of American bishops dropped the reference.

"The document of the social committee of the episcopate agrees with what numerous doctors and scientists think — namely that the condom is a mechanical means of preventing infection, but not the only one," said

Prof. Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. "As such, this is an important change."

Thomas C. Fox, editor of the National Catholic Reporter, an American weekly, and the author of "Sexuality and Catholicism," said: "I see this statement as a very important and welcome development. It was necessary — it had to happen, because church teaching is so incredible that people were just walking away from it."

Bishop Rouet's report noted that public health campaigns sponsored by French Government authorities have gone to great lengths to expose young people to the idea that using condoms could help keep them from being infected with H.I.V., the virus

that causes AIDS.

"After a very long reaction time, it appears that young people are using them more often," he wrote. "Public health authorities endorse this use. The church, thought to be opposed to it, sees itself accused of promoting death."

"The issue is badly posed, because it confuses several domains that are not on the same moral level. To think that a generalization of the use of condoms will remove all risk is to look only at the consequences without examining the causes and conditions of the spread of AIDS. Advising young adolescents to use condoms, far from helping them to understand their sexual identity, confines them to the power of their desires."