

Intrepid young activists push condoms at World Youth Day

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) Sending a small band of young people to talk about condoms at World Youth Day, the triennial Catholic jamboree that opens in Madrid on Tuesday (Aug. 16), sounds like penance, if not a kind of martyrdom.

The six-day event is expected to draw close to 1 million young pilgrims, as well as thousands of priests, nuns and brothers, some 800 bishops and cardinals, and Pope Benedict XVI himself, who will lead a huge outdoor Mass on Sunday.

Those are daunting numbers compared with 30 young activists who are taking their "Condoms4Life" campaign to the streets of the Spanish capital this week. Authorities in Madrid weeks ago barred bus ads and billboards for the effort.

But Jon O'Brien, head of Catholics for Choice, the Washington-based abortion rights lobby that organized the campaign, sounds anything but grim.

That's because last year Benedict conceded in an interview that in special cases -- such as prostitutes trying to prevent HIV infection -- condoms could be justified under Catholic ethical thinking.

"We're not pretending for a moment that he (Benedict) gave a liberal view on sexuality or anything else," he added. "But he did say condoms can prevent the spread of AIDS."

The Vatican might cringe at such characterizations, and the pope himself voiced exasperation with the media focus on his words on the topic.

Yet in a book-length interview released in 2010, Benedict clearly e-framed the Vatican's position on condoms when he said that if condoms are not "a real or moral solution ... in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality."

After a statement like that, Condoms4Life organizer Marissa Valeri said, there's no way the hierarchy can try and put "the genie back in the bottle."

Benedict's carefully worded statement was enough to inspire this year's theme for CFC's Condoms4Life project, and a far different one than its initial tagline a decade ago: "Banning condoms kills."

"Thank you, Pope Benedict, for acknowledging that condoms save lives," read the English- and Spanish-language advertisements that CFC's young campaigners will spread around the Spanish capital this week.

The Vatican is not about to endorse such an expansive view of the pope's statements, and is unlikely to directly engage the Condoms4Life message.

"It seems to me that before every papal trip there are demonstrations by people who have a different opinion and use the occasion to express their problems or concerns," said the Vatican's top spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, in a pre-trip briefing on Aug. 2. "It's part of life in a democratic country."

O'Brien said the 30 young activists hail from around the world -- Poland, the Philippines, the U.S., Uganda, Bulgaria, Ireland and elsewhere. Some are Catholic, but some are not. Some are gay, others straight, and a few are HIV-positive, he said.

The young activists plan to spread their message using a variety of "guerilla" tactics, such as putting up "cling" ads on walls and projecting the images four stories high onto buildings. They will also distribute wristbands and use street theater.

O'Brien said the team does not distribute condoms -- "Condoms are readily available in Spain," he said -- and that they will be careful not to push their message at Masses or other sacred events.

He also said the youths are "prepared for every contingency" should they face opposition, but added that has never happened before and he doesn't expect any pushback this time, beyond engaging in serious discussions about Catholic teaching and contraceptive use.

Those could be interesting conversations. The kicker of the CFC ads reads: "Good Catholics Use Condoms." In fact, studies show that in western countries, at least, the use of contraceptives is almost universal among Catholics, even weekly Mass-goers.

So O'Brien has reasons for optimism, and even the censoring of the billboard and bus promos didn't turn out so badly.

"As a result of the ban, that ad has appeared all over Spain," O'Brien said, pointing to the extensive coverage in Spanish media. "Did the people of Spain see the ad? Certainly they did."

"People are not offended by it. And I don't think the people coming to World Youth Day will be offended by it."

In any case, the Vatican may have other things to worry about. Registration for World Youth Day was running well below initial expectations, and a coalition of priests from Madrid's poorest parishes are protesting the festival's \$85 million price tag, saying the money could be used to help the poor and unemployed.

There's also the limited edition toilet paper being marketed by the Spanish company Ronova, which is producing rolls in gold and white -- the official Vatican colors -- with an "I love the Pope" logo across the packaging. Ronova hopes people will use the rolls first as streamers to welcome the pope's motorcade.