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Pope on the Zika epidemic: contraception ok, abortion evil

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Pope Francis is allowing women to protect themselves against the virus

By NEOnline | IR (<http://neurope.eu/author/neonlineir/>)

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At a critical point in time, **Pope Francis** took a critical stand on the Zika virus epidemic, saying that birth control “isn’t an absolute evil” and is in fact “the lesser of two evils” for women.

Theologically, the Pontiff evoked the precedent of **Pope Paul VI** that had allowed nuns in Africa to use birth control due to the threat of rape. But, in 2010, his predecessor, **Pope Benedict XVI** allowed condoms if these were intended to avoid HIV infection.

However, Pope Francis compared abortion to killing someone, which he called “absolute evil.”

The epidemic is spreading precisely in South America, where Pope Francis is touring. The Pope appealed for medical research to tackle the disease.

Several high ranking clergy in Brazil, El Salvador, and the United State have been making exactly the opposite claim to the Pope. They suggest that contraception is a sin “no matter what.”

However, the Catholic Church has categorically denied women with Zika the right to an abortion, even if there is a medical link between the virus and microcephaly.

The crisis

Microcephaly causes skulls to remain underdeveloped. if a pregnant woman contracts the virus, children are likely to be born with an underdeveloped head and a severe neurological disorder for which there is no known treatment

(**Guillain-Barre** syndrome). Some women in the region are reportedly begging online for abortion pills, in countries where these are forbidden.

Zika could trigger spike of illegal abortions, putting thousands of women's health at risk (https://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/IB_AWW-Latin-America.pdf). In Guatemala, it is calculated that women resort of inadequately trained health providers in a ratio of three-to-one, especially in rural areas, fearing social stigma, cost, lack of access to doctors. In 2014, 10% of all maternal deaths in Latin America were due to unsafe abortion. The debate is on across Latin America (<http://neurope.eu/article/abortion-for-women-with-zika-virus/>), including Brazil that has an estimated 1,5 million cases of infected subjects, but an adequate policy response could take years.

A 2014 US study suggests (<https://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/j.1728-4465.2014.00393.x.pdf>) that up to 56% of pregnancies in Latin America and the Caribbean region are unwanted, due to poverty and sexual violence. While the World Health Organization is warning women in Latin America against pregnancy, 24 million women in the region do not have access to modern birth control methods. Moreover, abortion is often illegal, which may trigger a spike in illegal procedures placing the lives of thousands of women at risk.

The Women-on-Web (<https://www.womenonweb.org/>) Dutch group is sending so-called morning-after abortion pills, although this is controversial because of anti-abortion laws in predominantly Catholic Latin America.

Poor women are more vulnerable.

The primary channel of spreading the disease is the ***Aedes aegypti mosquito***, whose habitat is in the tropics. Besides Latin America, WHO experts have said that this particular mosquito is present in most of Africa, parts of southern Europe, and parts south Asia.

The second channel is **human-to-human**, through sexual intercourse. And this is where contraception could make a difference.

(The Independent, CNN, National Catholic Review)

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