Controversial condom advert

Kenya EpiscopalConference says

Catholics for Choice is not a Catholicorganisation whilethe group claims the bishops do not represent the will of all

Catholics

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It all started with a full-pageadvert in the *Sunday Nation* and a billboard near the Consolata ShrineCatholic Church in Nairobi.

In the adverts, a US-based organisation

— Catholics for Choice (CFC)

— was urging Catholic faithful to embrace condom use, against the church’s position which supports abstinence for they yet-to-marry and faithfulness among the married.

As the storm kicked off by the

adverts settles, Catholic faithful in the country are divided on the way forward over the controversial and divisive condom debate.

The advert said: “We believe in

God, we believe that sex is sacred, we believe in caring for each other, we

believe in using condoms and good

Catholics use condoms.”

On its website, the organisation

says the adverts are being

run as part of an initiative dubbed

“Condoms4Life”. The initiative “is

an unprecedented worldwide public

education effort to raise public awareness

about the devastating effect of

the bishops’ ban on condoms”.

The billboard that stood near the

Consolata Shrine Catholic Church in

Westlands was seen by the Catholic

leadership in Kenya as a direct jibe.

A few days after the advert appeared,

the Kenya Episcopal Conference,

led by John Cardinal Njue, came

out with guns blazing and disowned

the adverts.

“These adverts deliberately ridicule

the Catholic teaching on responsible

sexual behaviour across all ages and

quickly proclaim the use of condoms,”

charged Cardinal Njue.

He added: “Catholics for Choice

are not Catholics in the sense of the

One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic

Church. Catholics are Pro-Life and

not Pro-Choice.”

**They tried**

Nairobi auxiliary bishop David

Kamau – Cardinal Njue’s assistant

in the Archdiocese of Nairobi – told

*Lifestyle* that they have unsuccessfully

tried to trace the people behind

the adverts.

“They are anonymous because

we have tried to look for them but

haven’t located anyone,” said Bishop

Kamau.

Indeed, the adverts were placed

through an advertising agency based

in San Francisco, US. The bishops

have advised Catholics to ignore the

adverts, saying the communication

was not from the Catholic Church.

“We wish to assure all the Catholics

and people of goodwill that the stand

of the Universal Catholic Church on

condom use has not changed,” said

the bishops.

The statement by the Kenya Episcopal

Conference drew a counter

reaction from the CFC leaders in the

US, who faulted the bishops’ stance.

“The campaign is vital,” said CFC

president and campaign co-ordinator

Jon O’Brien, ‘because the bishops’

recent activities are not representative

of Catholic teachings or beliefs.

Catholics do support the use of condoms,

and they do use them to protect

themselves and their partners.”

Mr O’Brien said the ad was based

on good science since more than 1.6

million people are living with HIV

and Aids in Kenya, and condoms are

an evidence-based method for preventing

the spread of the HIV.

“There are a billion Catholics

around the world, and here in Kenya

we represent a third of the population.

On the issue of condom use

the Kenyan bishops don’t speak for

Catholics here in Nairobi, or anywhere

else,” said O’Brien.

But according to Cardinal Njue,

sex should be practised in the context

of marriage. In the Catholic doctrine

against contraceptives, married couples

are encouraged to be faithful in

their marriage while the young people

are encouraged to abstain until

marriage.

Canon Prof Joseph Galgalo, Vice-

Chancellor, St Paul’s University, however,

says the condom debate should

be detached from the moral question

of sex outside marriage.

“If there are discordant married

couples, they should be allowed to

use condoms to guard against HIV

transmission and reinfection,” said

Prof Galgalo. “Single people should

abstain.”

The Anglican Church canon says

people who are single but sexually

active should not claim to profess

any faith.

But the hardline stance by Catholic

bishops on condom use has been

attacked as being out of touch with

reality.

A recent international poll found

that Catholics in Ghana, Ireland,

Mexico, the US and the Philippines

believe using condoms for HIV prevention

is pro-life because they help

save lives.

And in 2006, a survey conducted

by Steadman (now Synovate) revealed

that more Catholics support

use of condoms compared to followers

of other faiths.

“It is very apparent that the Catholic

church’s official position is at odds

with most of its members, and thus

needs to do a lot more work in its

pursuit of its policy in this particular

area, or simply tolerate their dissent,”

said a section of the report.

The Synovate survey results

prompted Mombasa Archbishop

Boniface Lele to declare that some

adjustments were needed on the issue.

“With some counselling – and

this is something we don’t tell everyone

– you can ask couples to use

condoms, so that the rate of reinfection

goes down,” he was quoted as

saying.

In 2010, Emeritus Pope Benedict

XVI said condom use can be justified

in some cases to help stop the spread

of Aids. The one example he cited as

a possibly appropriate use was by

male prostitutes.

**Hardline stance**

Bishop Kamau, however, argues

that the ban on contraception only

targets believers and practitioners of

the Catholic teachings.

“How many people read the Bible

but do not practise what it says?”

posed the bishop.

But the hardline stance has also

been dismissed as untenable, especially

in sub-Saharan Africa where

HIV infection rate remains high.

Last year alone, 1.2 million people

died from Aids-related causes in the

region alone, according to a report by

UNAids. And in 2011, an estimated

23.5 million people living with HIV

resided in sub-Saharan Africa, representing

69 per cent of the global HIV

burden. According to the Kenya Aids

Epidemic Update (2011) by the National

Aids Control Council, around

92,000 new infections are being recorded

every year in Kenya.

But despite the grim statistics, the

church in Kenya has consistently

sabotaged efforts to combat the

scourge, particularly those touching

on condom use.

In March, the government was

forced to pull down an advert which

encouraged promiscuous partners in

marriages to use condoms. Anglican

Church’s Bishop Julius Kalu said the

advert promoted extra-marital affairs

and sex among school pupils.

“There are better ways of passing

useful information to society. This

one has certainly failed,” he said.

feature

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**The number of Kenyans living**

**with HIV and Aids.**

**1.6m**

**Number of married people testing**

**positive for HIV infections**

**in Kenya per over 100**

**44pc**

**The year then Pope Benedict**

**said use of condom is justifiable**

**in some instances**

**2010**

**Heartening**