

What Does the Church Say About HIV/AIDS?

by **Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J**

A frequently asked question is: What does the Catholic Church say about AIDS? (Although the church is the whole people of God, the question usually means the Pope and bishops.) Other questions often stand behind this one: Is AIDS a form of God's punishment? How should I respond to my child who is HIV positive? Besides suffering from AIDS, why do I suffer so much prejudice and rejection, even from other members of the Church? Can we do anything about this world-wide epidemic?

The Church, in fact, has spoken clearly and powerfully about HIV/AIDS. Based on the Bible and on the Church's long tradition and especially on the life of Jesus, the Church's teachings have stressed 1) the value and dignity of every person, 2) the rights and responsibilities of society, 3) the love and compassion of God.

Where do these points, each deserving special attention, come from? Many national conferences of bishops have issued statements concerning HIV/AIDS. In the United States, the Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference published *The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response* in 1987. The whole National Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis* in 1989. Since then individual bishops or groups of bishops have addressed their people. Similarly, Pope John Paul II has regularly spoken about HIV/AIDS, either at AIDS conferences or during his visits to nations, especially those suffering from AIDS in a critical way. (Most of these statements can be found in *Origins*, the CNS documentary service published weekly.)

Human Dignity

Let's first listen to several excerpts from the bishops' statements. "Made in God's image and likeness, every human person is of inestimable worth. All human life is sacred, and its dignity must be respected and protected" (*The Many Faces of AIDS*). "The Gospel demands reverence for life in all circumstances" (Bishop John Ricard, 1994). "Discrimination and violence against persons with AIDS and with HIV infection are unjust and immoral" (*Called to Compassion and Responsibility*). "The necessary prevention against the AIDS threat is not to be found in fear, but rather in the conscious choice of a healthy, free and responsible lifestyle" (Pope John Paul II to a Vatican AIDS conference, 1989).

The message is clear: every human being is created in God's image, redeemed by

Jesus, and called to everlasting life. Accordingly, all persons have worth and dignity, rooted simply in who they are (and not in what they do or achieve). This conviction about the preciousness of every life grounds the Church's teachings about HIV/AIDS.

People living with HIV/AIDS face discrimination which is dehumanizing and suffering which strips the person's sense of worth and dignity. Of course, this worth also needs to be cherished and protected by all of us, by individuals and organizations, especially the Church. All forms of discrimination are wrong, whether in housing, jobs, insurance, health care, or religion. Long sections of *The Many Faces of AIDS* and *Called to Compassion and Responsibility* consider these issues in detail.

Because we are sacred and precious, all of us are called to live in ways that embody and express this dignity. There is, then, a serious call to personal responsibility and to personal behavior change. In the context of the AIDS epidemic, we all need to affirm healthy relationships rooted in trust, honesty, and respect. HIV/AIDS touches upon the issues of sexuality and sexual orientation, substance abuse and addictions, often in a context of poverty, racism, and sexism. The Church's statements remind HIV-infected persons of their grave moral responsibility not to expose others to the virus. All people are encouraged to respect the dignity of others, both in their personal feelings and interactions and in the structures of society.

Solidarity

The Church's teachings speak extensively about the rights and responsibilities of society. "As members of the Church and society, we have a responsibility to stand in solidarity with and reach out with compassion and understanding to those exposed to or experiencing this disease. We must provide spiritual and pastoral care as well as medical and social services for them and support for their families and friends" (*The Many Faces of AIDS*).

"A comprehensive AIDS education then has to: place AIDS within a moral context; impart accurate medical information and challenge misinformation; motivate individuals to accept the responsibility for personal choices and actions; confront discrimination and foster the kind of compassion which Jesus showed to others; model justice and compassion through policies and procedures" (New Mexico Bishops, 1990).

"As far as HIV is concerned, moreover, social responsibility has an important international dimension" (*Called to Compassion and Responsibility*). "AIDS has by far many more profound repercussions of a moral, social, economic, juridical and

structural nature, not only on individual families and in neighborhood communities, but also on nations and on the entire community of peoples" (Pope John Paul II to a Vatican AIDS conference, 1989).

The variety of these quotations highlight the complexity of this section. Solidarity leads to immediate care, to education, and to changing social structures.

Following the example of Jesus, the Church has long cared for the sick. The global spread of HIV/AIDS and the serious suffering that marks this disease challenged and renewed this ministry, especially in developing countries where health care resources are so severely limited. Hospitals with special care for persons with AIDS, hospices, caring for children who have been orphaned by AIDS, providing sensitive pastoral care: these and other steps have been urged and promised in the Church's teachings. All of us can contribute with some form of direct care through parishes or local HIV/AIDS agencies: support groups, transportation, child care, meal programs--or at least we can support those who can do this.

Since prevention is still imperative, education must play a pivotal role in responding to HIV/AIDS. As the quotation from the New Mexico bishops indicates, a comprehensive program would include a variety of essential elements. Implementing such a program in parishes and schools would be challenging but is a fitting response to the bishops' frequent call for clear understanding. Solidarity signifies our connection with our sisters and brothers around the world--and so raises the need for social justice. As the US bishops pointed out already in 1989, "It is of critical importance to recognize the shift of the disease to economically disadvantaged populations." It has only become worse since then. Poverty, oppression, alienation, and marginalization provide the perfect breeding ground for HIV/AIDS. Being poor and female particularly puts a person at risk. So, along with personal behavior change there is the overwhelming need for systemic change, for confronting and reducing racism, sexism, and classism. Recent developments in treatments using "combination" therapies have had many positive results. The great majority of HIV-infected persons in the world, however, have no access to basic health care, much less to these therapies. The success in the United States must not numb us to the devastation that HIV/AIDS is having on women, men, and children throughout the world. The long tradition of Catholic social teachings helps us address the economic, political, and social structures which profoundly impact these lives. Concrete action is possible both locally and globally, and certainly is called for by the teachings of the Church.

Grace

Everything the Church has said about HIV/AIDS has been stated in the context of faith and trust in a good and gracious God. "While preaching a Gospel of compassion and conversion, Jesus also proclaimed to those most in need the Good News of forgiveness. The father in the parable of the prodigal son did not wait for his son to come to him. Rather, he took the initiative and ran out to his son with generosity, forgiveness, and compassion" (The Many Faces of AIDS). "The love of God is so great that it goes beyond the limits of human language, beyond the grasp of artistic expression, beyond human understanding [God] loves us all with an unconditional and everlasting love" (Pope John Paul II as quoted in Called to Compassion and Responsibility).

"The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ shed light on the true meaning and value of human suffering. The Lord invites everyone to join him on the road to Calvary and to share in the joy of Easter" (Pope John Paul II to those in St. Francis Hospital, Uganda, 1993). "The threat of AIDS now confronts our generations with the end of earthly life in a manner which is all the more overwhelming because it is linked, directly or indirectly, to the transmission of life and love It is all part of the difficult problem of the meaning of suffering and of the value of all life, even when it is damaged or weakened" (Pope John Paul II to the bishops of Burundi, 1990). The various Church statements about HIV/AIDS always affirm the love and compassion of God. Jesus has revealed a God who loves each of us unconditionally, a God who forgives our sinful actions. God is not vengeful. God respects human freedom, calling us to love and responsibility, but not interfering even with destructive choices. HIV/AIDS is a human illness not a punishment from God. The statements are very clear about these points. HIV/AIDS causes great suffering and death. And so the Church teachings address this sober reality, helping people to stand before the mystery of suffering and to realize that even here God's tender mercies can be experienced. The teachings neither downplay the immensity of the suffering nor promote a passive acceptance. Rather the teachings urge all Christians to model their lives after Jesus, trusting in God, bringing comfort to those in need, and confronting oppressive structures and situations.

Continuing Tensions

Not surprisingly, these teachings have met with debate and disagreement, especially in three areas: 1) the understanding of human sexuality, 2) strategies for prevention, 3) social justice.

1. Long before HIV/AIDS was identified, the Church's teachings about heterosexuality and homosexuality had been questioned. The continued emphasis on holding together the procreative and unitive dimensions of sexual intercourse only in the context of marriage receives little support from cultures that trivialize sexuality. (It is estimated that by the year 2000 80 percent of HIV infections worldwide will be caused by heterosexual intercourse.) Presently, some enlightened discussion, such as the US bishops' pastoral message "Always Our Children," and many heated exchanges also swirl around the issue of homosexuality. □

2. Many people working for the prevention of the spread of HIV recommend both the use of condoms and needle-exchange programs. The Church's teachings have not supported these practices, arguing that they send the wrong message about sex and drugs and may ultimately lead to the increased spread of HIV. The statements recommend education and treatment aimed at changing behavior. One exception to this teaching was a statement by the Social Commission of the French Bishops' Conference in 1996. In a very limited and nuanced way, the statement acknowledges that the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV may be necessary.

3. The Church's social teachings had also been rejected by many people long before AIDS. Economic, political, and social powers do not easily yield to Gospel values. As we saw in the earlier section on solidarity, however, economic justice and the end of violent oppression are urgently needed to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS. As the debates continue, so do the deaths and suffering from AIDS, particularly in the developing countries. HIV/AIDS may rarely make the headlines these days, but it continues to devastate the lives of individuals, families, and communities. In this context our Church calls us to live and act as informed citizens and faithful disciples. "The crisis continues, but it can be met with understanding, justice, reason and deep faith" (Called to Compassion and Responsibility).

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