

THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

Message of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda

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THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

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To the Clergy, the Religious and all the people of God,
to men and women of good will:

Peace and God's Blessing!

Dear brothers and sisters, fellow-citizens.

INTRODUCTION

1. Our Country, Uganda, has for a long time fought against three main enemies, namely poverty, ignorance and disease, with varying degrees of success. But it is only in rare cases that all the three enemies are intricately tied together in one; and such is the case now when we have A I D S in our midst. The infectious disease A I D S (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), otherwise known as S L I M, is with us here in Uganda as it is in almost every country in the world; but here in our country it has spread to extremely alarming proportions, mainly due to the breakdown of family life and traditional values.

Another factor in this connection is our earlier ignorance of the modes of spread, often attributing the disease to witchcraft. The apparent decline in moral conduct has also played a significant role. Now, because of poverty, we are ill-equipped to cope with the social and economic implications brought about by A I D S which, in its wake, is mainly affecting the youth, thus killing off the most active and productive section of our society. This leaves us all the poorer and with more dependants - orphans and elderly people - than our community is able to support.

2. In this sad situation, we have thought it opportune to address a message of challenge and of solidarity to our fellow-citizens. We address ourselves not only to those who bear the name Christian but also to all people of good will.

3. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of reaching out to the people not only in times of joy but also in moments of tragedy and crisis. AIDS is a serious global problem which we have scarcely begun to address. It is also a matter of great concern for the Church, for "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World. *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 1)

Knowledge about A I D S

4. AIDS is a relatively new disease. Its existence was first announced by the Centre for Disease Control in 1981 and the virus responsible for the infection, the HUMAN IMMUNE-DEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV), was not identified until 1983. Intensive scientific research is being done in the world health-circles and new facts are still being discovered.

5. We commend our Government for its openness and truthfulness in informing the world about the existence and extent of the A I D S epidemic in Uganda. It has done a lot to inform the public of the facts about this disease, using all available means of communication. Likewise we commend the efforts which have been made and are still being made by non-governmental organisations, Churches and other religious bodies, in the fight against the further spread of the A I D S virus.

As a result of these efforts most Ugandans should now have the basic knowledge about AIDS and the modes of its spread. With them, we share a deep concern and we offer them our support to curb the spread of this disease and to lessen suffering and death.

A Call to Conversion

6. AIDS should not be seen in isolation but rather against the background of many changes in attitude with regard to family life and the loss of moral values. The main cause of the rapid spread of this disease here in Uganda as shown by surveys carried out, has been the loosening of sexual behaviour. Sexual disorder has been enhanced by the recent years of turmoil which our country has endured and by outside influences. Imported books, magazines, films and songs often teach that sex can be separated from married love. There is also the philosophy according to which sex can be enjoyed as a right of everybody, married or unmarried, provided it is made "safe" by taking measures to prevent conception. Consequently, contraceptives have been introduced here and distributed to people, especially the youth, without distinction.

7. In the light of that and what is now happening all around us, the AIDS epidemic should be looked at by us Christians as a phenomenon which constitutes a special time in salvation history, a moment of grace - paradoxical as this might seem. It is a time when once again we hear the call to conversion, to turn to faithfulness to God's Law regarding sex and marriage and to rediscover the value of chastity. We do not believe that this disease, or any other one for that matter, should be looked at as a punishment from God. Rather than looking at those who have contracted it with any feeling of condemnation, we should reach out to them in love, understanding and compassion.

The Christian response

8. The Christian response to this situation is two-fold: firstly a humble and sincere look at one's own life-style in the light of God's word and, secondly, reaching out to those who are sick, bereaved or orphaned.

9. In tackling the enormous task of preventing the further spread of A I D S, we must do all we can to call people back to God's law. Our teaching must be truthful, upholding Christian values. This can be emphasized in sermons, in teaching and counselling. We must be prepared to:

- challenge unchristian and untruthful literature
- educate people in Christian principles,
- challenge traditional customs which can spread the disease, and we should:
- form youth support groups in which responsible behaviour patterns are encouraged,
- encourage legitimate marriages, make marriage celebrations simple, inexpensive and possible, so as to foster stable relationships.
- use all available means of communication to bring the Christian message home.

AIDS should lead us to live our Christian identity with renewed vigour. We must act courageously and with confidence, always remembering the words of Jesus "I will be with you until the end of time" (Matthew .28:10)

10. The second challenge which the AIDS epidemic puts before us is that of reaching out to those who are suffering. It is only by so doing that *we* can be effective witnesses of God's love, bearing in mind the words that the Lord will say to us at the last judgement:

"I was hungry ... thirsty ... a strangernaked.... sick .. .in prison, and you fed me, clothed, took care of me, visited me..." (Matthew 25:34-36), and the Lord's call: "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned ... " (Lk. 6:36-37)

The people of God should be the family that embraces and sustains those who are sick, caring for them as brothers and sisters without barriers, exclusions, hostility or rejection.

Jesus healed the lame, cured lepers, cast out devils, restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, forgave sins, all without judging individuals or imputing blame. We too are called to do the same to those who in our day suffer from this new and deadly disease AIDS. The Lord Jesus is vividly present to us in the weak and ill, and these can in some sense share in the mission of Jesus' on-going work of redemption. Saint Paul was very much aware of this when he wrote to the Colossians concerning his own suffering:

"It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church" (Col. 1 : 24).

By providing direct care to the sick, by visiting them, praying with them, consoling them with the word of God, being supportive and sympathetic listeners and understanding their many problems and frustrations, we can offer our companionship and solidarity with them, along with the refreshment and reconciliation of the Lord.

We encourage the formation of Support Groups within our Christian communities and Parishes which will reach out to the people and families in need especially the orphans. We need to read the signs of the times and respond with courage. Christians in general and those with a special

vocation in particular should be caring for the people with AIDS and assisting their families and friends to cope with this tragic disease.

Whatever one's status is in society, our special call is to respond to people with AIDS in a generous and courageous way. In so doing, we bring the healing presence of Jesus into the situation. The AIDS virus is indeed a tragedy. When it takes hold of the human body it must be presumed to be fatal in all cases, given time. But someone suffering from A I D S should not be considered as just another case, but rather as a person in great need. The A I D S crisis is a reminder to the Christian Community that we must exemplify the qualities of the loving God by recognizing in it an extraordinary opportunity, a special time to care and act. Pope John-Paul II was unequivocal in characterising AIDS as a special situation that challenges the Church to be true to its identity as a sign of God's Love and Concern:

"Besides your professional contribution and your human sensitivities towards all affected by the disease, you are called to show the love and compassion of Christ and his Church ... to express love, solidarity and service and to exclude selfishness, discrimination and (Pope John-Paul II - November, 1987).

Need to join hands and work together

11. At the launching of the A I D S control programme in early 1987, the Ministry of Health appealed to all church leaders to help in the struggle against A I D S.

Indeed, we should be prepared to work together with people of the different Churches and religious organisations and other non-governmental organisations which exist in Uganda as well as with the Government, in such an emergency. The question we can all ask ourselves is HOW INVOLVED HAVE I BEEN, WHAT HAVE I DONE? AIDS is a problem of the whole community and every effort must be harnessed for its solution. The Catholic Church is ready to do its part not only by moral guidance and spiritual help, but also material ways as it already does in sectors such as those of Health, Education and Development.

12. In order to foster proper coordination of the activities in the field, we have recently created a new post at the Uganda Catholic Secretariat, that of an AIDS programme coordinator, with a special AIDS-desk within the Uganda Catholic Medical Bureau.

13. We fully support the various programmes of combating the spread of the disease being organised and conducted by various groups in the country which seek to collaborate with the Ministry of Health AIDS control programme in this difficult task.

14. We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the international agencies which assist us in various ways in the organization and the running of our AIDS control programmes.

Practicing Virtue with spiritual motives

15. As things now stand, the only really effective measure against AIDS is prevention, the avoiding of the causes of infection. This, in about 95 per cent of the cases in Uganda amounts to abstinence from sexual relations outside marriage and faithfulness within marriage. Here ethics and clinical medicine meet. However, while Medicine can recommend the practice of a certain virtue merely to avoid physical disease, sound Christian ethics does not stop at that, but aims at even higher values. A Christian who lives and acts with faith, under the guidance of the Spirit, will practice the virtues of chastity, conjugal fidelity, self-mastery and control because he knows that these are the only ways which are in conformity with human dignity, capable of leading to a more complete and balanced development and to a greater happiness. It is the pre-eminent responsibility of a Christian to correct deviations and vices which radically undermine human life, the dignity of the person and the family, the outstanding value of human love and therefore social living and the future of society. We are well aware that we cannot live up to this ideal without the assistance of the Holy Spirit to whom we must therefore submit ourselves with humility and docility.

16. Apart from the fact that condoms - which are being promoted by some agencies - only reduce the risk and are not a guarantee against the acquiring of AIDS, their use as a means to avoid the disease is unacceptable from the moral point of view. Indeed, having recourse to this method ignores the real cause of the problem that occupies us, namely the permissiveness which corrodes the moral fibre of the people.

Practical Recommendations and Guidelines

17. In an effort to address this question and look forward to a better future in the footsteps of Jesus our Saviour, we make the following recommendations:

a) To the Pastors of Souls

18. Realizing that many young people are facing premature death often with all kinds of anxieties and feelings of guilt, we ask you, dear co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, to be active in visiting the AIDS victims. Frequently console them with the Sacrament of healing and use the celebration of the Eucharist to bring interior joy, wholeness and consolation to all the people concerned. Above all else, try, through your goodness and understanding, to be witnesses of God's love for His children. Get all the faithful in the patients' immediate surroundings involved in prayer for those who are sick and dying:

“Up cry out in the night
In the early hours of darkness
Pour your heart out like water
Before Yahweh
Stretch out your hand to Him
For the lives of your children.” (Lamentations 2:19)

b) To those afflicted with A I D S

19. As God's children you are encouraged to have a positive attitude to life and to have trust and hope in God here and hereafter. In this time of pain and suffering, you must turn to God in trust and confidence, relying on his never-failing word:

"For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not woe, plans to give you a future full of hope" (Jeremiah 29:11)

We also exhort you to draw courage and comfort from the following words of God:

"But now, thus says Yahweh, ... do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine. Should you pass through the sea, I will be with you; or through rivers, they will not swallow you up. Should you walk through fire, you will not be scorched and the flames will not burn you. For I am Yahweh, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviourbecause you are precious in my eyes because you are honoured and I love you... .Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (Isaiah 43: 1-5)

c) To those working for the Youth

20. We appeal to you, clergy and lay faithful, who are in a special way exercising the Ministry of the Youth and are by the nature of your work, in more direct contact with them, to try and find ways and means of encouraging bigger numbers of young men and women to resort to the Sacrament of Matrimony and aspire to a stable and continued faithful marital relationship. Before marriage, each member of a prospective couple should be encouraged to choose wisely and look into his or her past. If there has been risky behaviour, the couple should be advised of the optional premarital H I V test, clearly pointing out the pros and cons and the consequences of the test result.

21. If the HIV test is taken the result should be given to the individual, and treated confidentially between the Counsellor and the Person intending to get married.

22. If the test is positive, the Counsellor should make the person aware of the risk to the partner. Even if the test is negative the Counsellor should use the opportunity to reinforce positive behaviour in the person.

23. You should note that the couple reserves the final say as to the course of action to take and that you have no right to demand the result of the test or to deny the Sacrament of Matrimony to a couple on grounds of the HIV test result. However, the person may want to reveal the result to you, in which case you can freely advise him or her.

24. Furthermore, all the youth should be given education about A I D S and Christian values, which should be backed up with efforts to bring about a change in attitudes and behaviour patterns. This education should be geared to making the young people realise that ultimately they

atone can be responsible for their health and life. Young Christians should be encouraged to be promoters of healthy ways of living.

25. Finally, we advise you, Pastors and all those who assist you in the apostolate of the youth, to revive and encourage study-groups, games, recreational facilities and alternative positive forms of entertainment so as to keep the youth profitably occupied. They may also be encouraged and invited to help those who are sick or in need.

d) To the Married

26. To you who have received the Sacrament of Matrimony, we stress and remind that the most significant mode or transmission of the AIDS virus (HIV) is through normal heterosexual contact, and that the greatest risk factor is multiple sexual partners. A stable and continued faithful marital relationship between husband and wife is the most effective protective weapon against catching AIDS. We encourage you to seek God's grace and guidance in prayer, for a family that prays together stays together.

27. In the circumstances of an H I V positive spouse or a promiscuous one, counselling and spiritual guidance from a competent person should be sought by the couple or by the partner who has reason to fear being infected.

e) To the Friends and Relatives of the A I D S Patients and the H I V positive

28. You should neither forget nor shun your Christian obligation to reach out in love and not judge or condemn the AIDS patient. Experts assure us that there is very minimal risk of catching AIDS through caring for a patient, which risk can be eliminated by simple hygienic measures. In the care of an AIDS relative, you should get in touch with expert counselling and supportive services. A supporting community can be a real consolation to someone with AIDS or to a family coping with the problem of AIDS.

29. We realise that your families may sometimes find themselves in such serious situations that you could become desperate and try to go to seek a solution in witchcraft. We warn you not to give in to this temptation and strongly encourage you all, the AIDS patients as well as relatives and friends, to seek your consolation in God, in accordance with the faith in which you were baptized and which you have always professed.

30. We condemn those selfish individuals of whatever category, profession or standing in life, who knowingly exploit the sickness of others in order to enrich themselves. This is an abominable affront against all principals of justice and charity.

31. With the devastating results of AIDS in our country, the problem of orphans is becoming very acute. Families are therefore being encouraged to give a home to those who are orphaned. We also call upon Christian communities to help as much as possible in this regard.

32. Finally, we call upon you all, dear people of God, to avoid any kind of discrimination or segregation against persons with AIDS or HIV infection. Such a course of action, which is inhuman and unchristian, can only be caused by an exaggerated fear. We should accept the view of experts concerning the ways in which the disease can be transmitted. We therefore join our voice to that of the World Health Organisation (WHO) to urge all people of good will:

"to protect the human rights and dignity of H I V-infected people and people with AIDS, and of members of population groups, and to avoid discriminatory action against and stigmatization of them in the provision of services, employment and travel".(WHO against AIDS discrimination: 41st World Assembly, Resolution WHA 41. 24, 13 May 1988).

Consequently, persons with AIDS or H I V infection should not, merely on account of this, be restricted from work, school or living in community with others, travelling with them or using the same equipment or facilities.

f) To the Health-Workers

33. Health-workers are encouraged when they see their patients recover. In the case of AIDS, however, dear health-workers in Uganda, you have to face the sad fact that you can only offer symptomatic relief to your patients; you have no real cure to offer. In spite of this, we encourage you to maintain your morale in a spirit of faith and never to abandon your work in an attitude of despair. The medical art has its meaning also in the relief of suffering and the care of the terminally ill." We know also that you are often faced with difficult ethical questions such as who should be given priority in treatment and in the use of scarce medicines and drugs. We pray to the Holy Spirit to be with you at all times and help you solve these dilemmas.

In this connection, we urge all the health-units to have an open and welcoming attitude to those with AIDS and HIV infection.

g) To all believers: Prayer

34. We reaffirm the role and importance of prayer in the life of the Church and encourage daily prayer in Churches, in small Christian communities and in the families with and for those who are suffering from AIDS, for their families and dear ones. We urge Pastors of souls, catechists and those who assist in the preparation of the Liturgy and other community-prayer to include the needs of the A I D S patients with an explicit invitation to the faithful to offer their spiritual as well as temporal assistance. We also encourage liturgies specially organised for the sick in which the sick themselves take an active part.

Prayer is needed in order that we may accept this moment of grace and respond with generosity and dedication, reaching out in love .to those who are sick or bereaved.

We also need to pray that we may have the strength to lead better lives. We need to ask for a change of heart and conduct in our society and the whole world.

CONCLUSION

35. The tragedy of the A D S epidemic touches each one of us and here again we experience our human fragility and limitations. With the sad experience of burying our relatives and friends every day - in many cases having several such burials on the same village each day - we recall and make our own the torment of Rachel:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, lamenting and weeping bitterly: It is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." (Jer. 32:15)

However, we believers do not lament in the same those who have no faith. We see in this phenomenon A I D S God's hand who certainly wants to something.

36. Let each one of us look into his or her self, in order to find out what this means for him or her here and now. It challenges us aspects of our living. Let us strengthen our faith and in the almighty God who is himself the life and source life. Let this be an incentive for work, solidarity, purification and personal salvation. Meanwhile we can sure that if we return to God with all our hearts, He will certainly come to rescue us from our plight.

THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF UGANDA

8th September 1989,

Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary