

Moral aspects of the AIDS epidemic in the Pacific expressed in 1990

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Introduction

Every human problem is complex because it touches all the different facets that make up the human person - the physical, the spiritual, the individual, the social, the economic and so on - and AIDS is first and foremost a human problem. While the origin of the disease may not be known, we do know that its dramatic spread has been influenced by social behaviour patterns that are self-destructive.

On 1 March 1990, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported the existence of 31 confirmed cases of AIDS in the countries and territories which comprise the dioceses of the Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC). AIDS cases have been confirmed in 7 of the 19 countries and territories of CEPAC. At the same time, WHO announced that a cumulative global total of 222 740 cases of AIDS had been reported from 153 countries.

The incidence of AIDS in the Pacific may be slight by world standards but it makes us aware that we are already part of a world epidemic. There is no call for panic, but there is need for everyone to make serious appraisal of the situation and to take whatever steps may be necessary to deal with present and future eventualities. In the Pacific, we have the benefit of learning from what has been happening in the world community as regards AIDS prevention through information and education. We learn too how to minister to sufferers from AIDS.

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A Christian perspective of HIV/AIDS

The Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (CEPAC) has a draft statement on HIV/AIDS. In other parts of the world, the Catholic Church has already produced a number of official statements on AIDS. Between January 1987 and March 1989, eleven Episcopal Conferences responded to the situation with documents and public statements. In November 1989, the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Health Workers held an International Conference on AIDS in Rome. Pope John Paul II has spoken on the AIDS situation, as have many individual bishops.

Many Bishops' Conferences have given guidance not only because of the danger of AIDS but because of the much deeper moral issues involved. These statements are sober, non-condemnatory and compassionate. The Californian Bishops urged people to get over 'irrational fears' by studying 'basic facts' on how the disease is transmitted. The New Zealand Bishops advise their people: 'The only sure way to stop the spread of AIDS is responsible sexual behaviour, behaviour that requires self-discipline and avoidance of extra-marital sexual activity'. The Australian Bishops say: 'There is no escaping the brute fact that this world-wide AIDS epidemic is one disastrous result of promiscuous sexual behaviour'.

The Australian Catholic bishops have established a broad-based pastoral education programme on AIDS, particularly through the Catholic school system. This programme emphasises personal development - a sense of self-worth based on the dignity of the human person and the goodness of human sexuality. It reflects our Christian understanding of love, faithfulness and marriage. *“A proper vision of human sexuality must lie at the heart of any programme of education. A ‘condom culture’ is no decent or effective alternative”.*

The Bishops say AIDS should not be presented as a divine judgement on a sexually permissive society. They are aware that many AIDS patients are innocent sufferers. 'However, when we ignore or contradict the laws of Nature, harmful consequences often follow. There are many examples: environmental pollution is one, a hangover is another.'

* The late Bishop of Tonga. This paper was presented at Thirtieth South Pacific Conference, SPC, Noumea, New Caledonia, in October 1990.

Promiscuity, in its simplest level, is the pursuit of sexual pleasure, and in considering the matter, many go no further. But those working in the field of human relationships, and from our own experience, know that there is much more to it than that. The man or woman who pursues sexual contacts relentlessly is often a deeply-hurt and wounded human being who is incapable of forming loving relationships. These vulnerable people have often had very disturbed childhoods. The current large-scale marital instability is producing a vicious circle, for in turn the wounded children of such marriages are the potential alcoholics, drug addicts, disordered personalities, young offenders and sexual deviants of the future. The AIDS crisis must make us look more deeply at the instability of family life. It can be a time of grace, a moment of truth for us. It is a timely call to conversion - to change our lifestyle.

The arrival of AIDS is a jolt, a needed reminder to give priority to finding new ways of proclaiming the truth about sexual conduct, promoting and safeguarding the family, the fundamental human unit. For this we need thought, funding and research. We need to win the hearts and minds of our people to the beauty and worth of good family life, to all that is good and noble in human relationships. We especially need the collaboration with commitment of governments, scientists, churches and so many people of goodwill.

Love and sexuality

The world is hungry for the proper understanding of love, of sexuality and of the marriage love relationship. But we must avoid simplistic solutions. Faced with the crisis of AIDS it is urgent and imperative that a sexual and marital morality based not on fear, but on personal love should be established in our communities. St John makes it clear that fear and love are incompatible.

In proclaiming love, Christianity must not only advocate discipline and self-control, but also search the hearts and minds of ordinary people for the contemporary meaning of sexuality and marriage. We need to take all that is best in our traditions and combine it with the most recent advances made by the psychological sciences in understanding human nature, so as to present it anew (cf. *London Tablet*, 10/01/87 'AIDS and Morality' by Jack Dominion).

For the last 30 years or so, the world has been subjected to false propaganda regarding human lifestyle which caused moral restraint to become a dirty word, and has opened the door to all kinds of abuses which are destructive of the human person. Were it not for these abuses, it is most likely

that AIDS would not have had the opportunity to develop epidemic proportions.

It is a sad statement on our lifestyle that we are being faced with annihilation by a disease which is spread principally by promiscuous sex, whether it be heterosexual or homosexual, and through the misuse of drugs. It is equally a sad statement on our societies that we are trying to combat this killer disease with so-called 'safe sex', the use of condoms for promiscuous sex and anal interventions, and sterile needles for drug users. These things are in themselves destructive of human persons and destructive of our social life, whether we get AIDS or not.

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AIDS is a serious and a frightening problem, but even at the socio-economic level it is only a minor problem when we compare it with the enormous number of solo parents who have to be aided in practically everything. There is also the enormous cost to society of trying to rehabilitate drug

addicts, the cost of the mental institutions and the prisons. There is a whole Pandora's box of ills that comes on society when we take the lid off and accept a so-called 'permissive society'.

John Paul II calls the safe sex programme 'a roadway to death' and he is right. The safe sex approach does not get at the cause of the problem. We are just wrapping up this problem in a little package for easier distribution. Condoms have probably done more to contribute to the spread of the permissive society than anything else. A whole generation has grown up believing you can do what you like as long as you are wearing a bit of rubber. 'Right and wrong are no longer issues, the only thing that is important is my pleasure'.

Condoms take the responsibility out of human life and when this happens we cease to be fully human. Is a regular condom user going to change his ways just because he left his condoms in his other trousers? Sooner or later, or probably sooner than later, he is going to take a risk because he has never learnt self-control. If you don't believe this, why then the sudden explosion of unmarried mothers amongst a generation that has been brought up on condoms and pills?

When you buy a machine of any kind, you usually get a book of maker's instructions to go with it. If you want the machine to last and to give a good performance you follow the instructions. If the machine burns out, you will probably find that you have neglected to follow the instructions and put oil in the sump. If the bearing goes on you, you have probably neglected to grease it. The human person is like

that. There are maker's instructions that go with it. They say, don't kill, don't steal, and don't commit adultery. If you do, you will self-destruct. You are not made to be like that. You are made to be responsible individuals and social persons, and if you don't follow these instructions, you are the ones who will suffer. These maker's instructions are for our own good.

A Pacific way forward

Our Pacific societies - both Christian and non-Christian - have understood these maker's instructions and have enforced them through culture and customs. In this way, they have impressed on people their dignity as human persons with social responsibilities. Of course, in individual cases, they have not always been successful, no society ever is, but at least they were not afraid to demand of their people that measure of self-control and responsibility which they instinctively understood to be necessary for a happy, healthy and fulfilled life.

In our enlightened age, do we have to be satisfied with giving our people the lethal rubbish of western civilisation, and sit back and watch them becoming addicts of the permissive society with just a bit of rubber between themselves and death?

For God's sake and for love of our people, No! We have to affirm or to rebuild our people's cultural respect for themselves, the values of chastity and of good family life. We have to challenge the idealism, the natural goodness and respect that youth have for themselves and their future and build a society based on sound morality. Let us promote this sound morality through culture and laws and give it our support to make it a success. Succeed in this, and you will have no AIDS problem, neither will you have a problem of solo parents, or mental hospitals bulging at the seams.

But encourage a permissive society in the Pacific with the western condom culture - a con culture really - and you are courting not only physical death, but also the death of the spirit of people, you are also promoting a host of social ills, as well as a great economic burden.

Care of patients with AIDS

The effort to prevent the spread of AIDS is one thing, the care of those who are sick with AIDS is another. Because of ignorance and irrational fear, there can be a stigma and discrimination against AIDS patient and their families. Many patients die of loneliness before they die of AIDS.

Churches and Christians are giving practical support to governments in caring for the sufferers from this modern disease. Religious orders, priests and church lay organisations are involving themselves with nursing and pastoral care for AIDS sufferers. It is not only the help that is given but the truly Christian and loving way in which it is given that is making such an impact. It is giving people an understanding of Christianity they never had before. As Christians our first response to AIDS sufferers must be one of acceptance and care. We are challenged to this by the example of Christ and the long tradition of the Church.

In the name of religion, lepers, prostitutes and all kinds of hurt people were ostracised from society. Jesus was angered by such practices. He touched lepers and cured them. He healed the hurts of so-called sinners and he gave them courage and new life by being with them as their friend.

AIDS patients are men and women facing death from a terrible disease. There can be no service to them which starts from the assumption that they are marked by a stigma and suffering deservedly from sin. Such an attitude condemns the person who entertains it. Rather AIDS sufferers are human beings, they are our brothers and sisters who deserve our love, care and compassion. From a moral point of view we should give our full support to the efforts of WHO to ensure that the human rights of AIDS patients are protected, that there is no ostracism and alienation. No evil exists in the world which does not have the potential to challenge the lives of people to become more fully human and closer to God.

This is true of the patient, of his immediate family, and of society in general.

The families of AIDS patients and those caring for them need sensitive support and pastoral care. They need to love the patients in a special way by the warmth of their affection, to help them in their daily needs and to show them that they belong and that they are important to them. However we may conceive of God, we experience him in loving and in being loved, and this challenge to love fully and unconditionally is likewise a challenge to become fully human.

Society is challenged to overcome fear and selfishness and to put resources for providing the environment in which the sufferers and their families can experience their human rights and dignity. We have seen some of our societies struggling with this challenge - the alarm, the fear, the crazy ideas that are so thoughtlessly voiced at the first contact with

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the disease, and then the gradual calming down, the common sense, the reason and compassion coming to the fore as the challenge is taken up. And our society has taken a step forward, it has grown a little, become a better society.

Conclusion

As a medical problem and from the aspect of the economy, AIDS is no doubt all bad news! But from a moral point of view, it does not need to be all bad news; through its challenge it has the potential to make us better humans. As a Catholic Bishop, I give praise to WHO for its work in bringing to the attention of the world the magnitude and urgency of the AIDS problem and for the lead it is taking in encouraging research, in educating people, in fighting for the human rights of sufferers, in obtaining resources and in distributing them world-wide. It is magnificent work and WHO deserves the respect and gratitude of all.

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I had been asked to speak on the moral aspects of the AIDS epidemic in the Pacific, and I thank the South Pacific Commission for that, and all of you for listening. I would expect that already the attitude of the Catholic Church

would be well known to you, and that in a multi-cultural society, its attitude will be accepted by some while not by others.

Since you have invited me to speak on the moral aspect, it is clear to me that you are aware that AIDS is more than a merely medical problem, and I appreciate your openness in listening

to aspects of the moral side which may be at variance with your own belief. Your goodwill, however, I do not question, and I ask God's blessing on your work. □

