

AJANews 101 - June-July 2011

Blessed Anuarite Nengapeta is a young Sister of the Holy Family of Kisangani. She worked at Wamba as a teacher. She was murdered resisting the sexual demands of a rebel leader in the Congo in 1964. St Aloysius Gonzaga is a young Jesuit who selflessly gave his life caring for victims of the deadly plague in Rome in 1591. We entrust the African Jesuit AIDS Network to their prayer and protection.

AJAN: BUILDING A COMMUNITY COMMITTED TO DEFEATING AIDS

Every year, Jesuits come to stay at AJAN House, the coordinating hub of the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN), which is based in Kangemi, a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Nairobi. They come to learn more about AIDS and the Jesuit response, and to contribute to this response, giving of their time, knowledge and talents to enrich the Network. Their views on arriving and leaving AJAN are unfailingly insightful, and we share some of them with you here.

No room for indifference

"Indifference to this epidemic is a gift for the virus." After a month at AJAN House, Italian Jesuit Walter Bottaccio SJ succinctly summed up a mantra of the Network. With AIDS appearing to be sliding down the global agenda, AJAN has emphasised over and over again: the disease still poses a terrible threat to Africa and the rest of humanity, and we imagine otherwise at our peril.

This is an urgent message that Jesuits who have spent time at AJAN House subscribe to. In 2010 and this year, many have come and gone as per AJAN tradition, for short periods of internship, research, pastoral experience, or for regency - a placement, normally two years long, undertaken by Jesuit scholastics in-between studies. There was Harris Tombi SJ (Cameroon); Watson Matara SJ (Zimbabwe); Fr Michael Onu Aghadi SJ (Nigeria); Fr Razarindrazanaka Louis de Gonzague SJ (Madagascar); Fr Walter Bottaccio (Italy); Adam Hinks nSJ (Canada); Mborong Etienne Senyuy SJ (Cameroon). Fr Thuadingoma SJ (DRC) came on sabbatical from June 2010 to July 2011, and regent Augustine Ekeno SJ (Kenya) leaves in September after more than two years to be replaced by Patrice Ndayisenga SJ (Rwanda) who arrived recently at AJAN House.

Patrice says it was awareness of how "HIV and AIDS ravage the world and sub-Saharan Africa in particular" that prompted him to go to AJAN. "Statistics may affirm some successes of campaigns against the pandemic but the reckoning rate of infection shows that more efforts need to be deployed," he says. "I consider my mission in AIDS ministry as a precious opportunity which will open my mind to new perspectives as I seek the best ways to help those who are in the most need of our love, help, compassion and care."

According to the 2010 UNAIDS epidemic update, although the global number of new HIV infections has been falling, levels of new infections overall remain high, with sub-Saharan Africa still bearing an inordinate share of the world's HIV burden. The majority of new infections continue to occur in this continent, where an estimated 1.8 million

people were infected in 2009. The UN update reports that the number of people living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa rose to 22.5 million, comprising 60% of the global total, while 1.3 million people died of HIV-related illnesses, 72% of the death toll worldwide.

Only a strong community can defeat AIDS

Patrice welcomes the opportunity to step out of the world of academia back into 'real life'. "After studying philosophy, my mission at AJAN certainly helps as a step in the transition from ideal ideas of philosophy to real experiences of our *everydayness*." He is unlikely to be disappointed. Time spent at AJAN House, which usually includes working on continent-wide projects as well as outreach in local Church AIDS projects, tends to be an eye-opener.

Etienne, a student at Hekima College of Theology in Nairobi, stayed at AJAN House from 12 May to 30 June 2011. His stay was packed with activity including involvement in: formation for novices from Catholic religious congregations in Arusha, Tanzania; the AJAN HIV&AIDS Prevention Programme for Youth (AHAPPY); production of an AJAN-sponsored video-documentary with the students of the Saint Charles Lwanga High School in Sarh, Chad, entitled *YankiNdele* (All that glitters). "This has been an enriching period for me," says Etienne. "The works I did at AJAN House brought me in contact with the reality of the Network and made me decide to integrate the AIDS reality in all my future apostolates. I have noticed that HIV/AIDS is more than just a behavioural issue; it concerns the whole person in all his or her dimensions." Etienne also learned more about AJAN itself: "One thing that gives me joy and hope is that AJAN has gotten more practically involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS with the development of programmes like AHAPPY and research about Moringa Oleifera [a highly nutritious plant] to improve the nutrition of people with HIV."

Adam, a Canadian novice who stayed for five months in 2011, says that his work in AJAN House "drove home just how many labourers there are quietly bringing the Gospel in so many ways to the painful reality of HIV/AIDS in Africa." Adam volunteered at the Uzima programme for people with HIV of the Jesuit parish of St Joseph the Worker, which is located in Kangemi, and at another Nairobi-based programme. He says: "I saw first-hand how the Church's response is rooted in charity, compassion and care for the individual."

Fr Walter, from Italy, came to AJAN House in May 2010 for part of his tertianship, the last phase of a Jesuit's formation, and volunteered at Uzima too. The experience left him convinced that "more people have to do this. Everybody has to know the AIDS epidemic better." There is no room for complacency. "Only a community that takes care of each person can help people with HIV against stigma and extreme poverty. This is the best way to help people say clearly that they are HIV-positive. Without a strong community it's very difficult to imagine a time without AIDS." And, he believes, it is imperative for the Church to be involved: "The Church is a special community that professes faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in a unique position not only to care and support those affected but also to engage in prevention of this terrible epidemic."

Learning to serve

To build such a strong and caring Church community, formation is essential. Ekeno will leave AJAN House soon when his regency is over. He says: "I see a time spent learning how to serve, how to use my acquired knowledge in responding to apostolic demands. The wide experience of Fr Michael Czerny SJ and Fr Paterne Mombé SJ [past and

present AJAN Coordinators] taught me how to respond to HIV/AIDS as a greater need in the African Assistency and not only inspired but also imprinted within me a passion to stand in defence of those infected and affected by AIDS. Their enthusiasm and dedication has informed and shaped my vocation as a young Jesuit in Africa - a continent challenged by the pandemic." If his time at AJAN has benefited Ekeno, AJAN has been no less fortunate. Due to unforeseen difficulties in the transition of leadership at AJAN, Ekeno, as AJAN Assistant Coordinator, was called to shoulder plenty of work and responsibility, which he did cheerfully and successfully.

Another Jesuit who served AJAN ably in the challenging time of transition is Fr Thuadingoma SJ who served as temporary vice-superior of the Jesuit community at AJAN House. Fr Thuadi joined AJAN after 15 years of teaching and chaplaincy at a secondary school in Kinshasa. After devoting his first weeks to reading about HIV and AIDS, he soon found himself welcoming several guests to AJAN House. "People practically from the four corners of the earth come to AJAN for a variety of purposes, mostly related to Africa, poverty and HIV and AIDS," he recalls. Fr Thuadi participated in the AJAN formation for novices in Arusha; he also went on outreach at St Aloysius Gonzaga Secondary School for AIDS-affected orphans in Kibera, a huge slum suburb of Nairobi; and in the city's Kenyatta Hospital, where he visited "one of our HIV+ people". "What I learnt about AIDS itself," he muses, "is what can still be done to delay the passing from HIV to AIDS, and the tremendous love to be shown to those who are sick at the stage of AIDS."

A typically Ignatian response

What Fr Thuadi also discovered is that AJAN has a profoundly Jesuit identity, following as it does directly in the footsteps of St Ignatius, the founder of the Society of Jesus. "Caring for the sick was part and parcel of the apostolate of our first companions in Rome, where the Jesuit order was founded in 1534. They cared for people who suffered from the plague." Further, Fr Thuadi underlines the emphasis of AJAN on tackling AIDS concerns through education and formation, in line with Ignatian pedagogical tradition. "I can see from here the merit of our actions and their scope in not forgetting the challenges that lie ahead," he adds.

Adam also delves back into the history of the Jesuits when reflecting on his time at AJAN House: "In 1646, Athanasius Kircher drew an illustration depicting the worldwide mission of the Society of Jesus as a giant tree. This vast tree had many branches representing the different regions of the world, with each of the hundreds of leaves representing a single Jesuit community. When I first saw this drawing - entitled the *Horoscopium Catholicum Societatis Jesu* - it occurred to me that the tree would not exist if not for the thousands of individual Jesuits who spent their lives working on the ground." Kircher's drawing also reminded Adam of the Church response to HIV/AIDS. "I saw how the work of Jesuits and their collaborators is a small, but important, part of a larger response - one of many branches on a large tree. AJAN itself is made up of hundreds of individuals working directly with real people."

A community depends on its members

Just as Jesuits come to AJAN House to learn, they also give a good deal. Theirs is an insightful vision of what AJAN strives to be, both at network and project levels: a strong and dedicated community within the Church that is missioned to serve, in typical Ignatian tradition, people who are affected by HIV and AIDS or vulnerable to infection, especially those who have no one else to care for them; a community of individuals whose response is expressed in personal presence and care, in education-based

prevention, and in formation and reflection for an evermore compassionate and effective response.

However, the body depends on the functioning of its different members. As he prepares to leave AJAN, Ekeno says: "It is my hope and prayer that AJAN will one day stand out, among thousands of organisations, as a continental model to respond to a global challenge like AIDS. However, this will depend on all the Jesuits and their collaborators, on how they unite to use this work as an effective means to fight the pandemic."

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