

AJANews 97 - December 2010

The parish: A privileged place to fight HIV and AIDS
Zimbabwe: People who care, care for their spouses and children
Fight against *the banalization of sexuality*
Every blessing of the season!

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.

THE PARISH: A PRIVILEGED PLACE TO FIGHT HIV AND AIDS

Experience has shown that in a sub-Saharan African context, the parish can be a privileged place to fight HIV/AIDS. In the second of an AJANews mini-series about AIDS ministry in Jesuit parishes, Fr Robert Dundon SJ writes about his work in St Joseph's Parish in Benin City, Nigeria:

When I came to St Joseph's Parish four years ago, I found a Parish Action Committee on AIDS (PACA) in place. In the PACA monthly meeting, there are typically 10 to 15 volunteers and one staff person from the Archdiocesan Health Office. Currently they are visiting 80 or 90 people living with AIDS and bringing back written reports. The parish also hosts an AIDS support group which meets monthly. About 10 or 15 people attend.

The other two large central city parishes have committees similar to PACA. If any person tests seropositive at the Archdiocesan testing centre, they are referred to one of the parish committees for follow-up visits. The Archdiocesan HIV/AIDS effort is funded by the US Catholic Bishops via the Catholic Relief Service.

In Nigeria antiretrovirals (ARVs) are available for free. Hospitalization is also free for AIDS patients, at least at the teaching hospitals. The next step in the growth of our parish PACA will be to set up a small drug depot in the parish offices to facilitate the distribution of ARVs to the people the PACA volunteers visit.

The parish is also my base for going out to give Education for Life (EFL) workshops. I was trained for this ministry in Kampala in 1993. During my years as parish priest of Christ the King Parish in Lagos, I did EFL in the parish and started a Youth Alive Club. During December we are doing EFL in St Joseph's Parish with 32 parish youth from the Legion of Mary, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Catholic Youth and PACA. Recently we finished the EFL workshop with 100 staff of the Pax (Benedictine) Herbal Research Centre in Ewu. The centre is operated by the Benedictine monks. The EFL group at Pax consisted of about a third married folks and nearly a third Muslims.

EFL is a programme devised by Sr Kay Lawler MMM and modified and popularized by Sr Miriam Duggan FMSA. Different versions of EFL are now in use in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa, Mauritius and other countries. It is a workshop based on group problem-solving. Instead of preaching at youth, we give them questions about life problems for discussion in small groups, so that they can

clarify and choose their own values. For example we use questions about relationships, *At what age is it right to get a boy friend?* for girls' groups. We ask, *Am I really free? What limits my freedom?*

At present we complete the EFL in four sessions of four hours each. The workshop ends with a closing Mass. At Mass the participants offer their written choice and commitment to behaviour that will lead them to a happy, healthy and holy life. At the end of the Mass we pray over the participants individually as we return their choice and commitment papers to them.

Completion of an EFL workshop entitles a person to become a full member of a Youth Alive Club. Youth Alive Clubs may undertake any activities they wish, provided only that they reinforce the values they have chosen in their EFL workshop. I have adapted the Youth Alive Workbook published by the South African Bishops Conference. The original EFL outline is available from the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

I am trying to involve more Jesuits in EFL and Youth Alive Clubs. Next year one of our newly ordained Jesuits will be involved in this work in addition to his teaching duties. I feel strongly that this ministry should be promoted by the Society of Jesus.

ZIMBABWE: PEOPLE WHO CARE, CARE FOR THEIR SPOUSES AND CHILDREN

For World AIDS Day 2010, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference released the following statement, urging personal action to deal with the pandemic.

Where are we? HIV and AIDS will be with us for a while, even for the rest of this century. The illness and its social effects will not end soon and the Lord calls each of us to do what we can to care for people and families affected by this terrible disease. There is some good news. The prevalence of infection in the population has dropped from around 33% at its height to 14.2% today. And there is a growing awareness among young people, especially through peer education programmes, that the illness can be prevented. And also, if people gain access to ARVs and nourishing food, even those infected can lead a normal life.

Yet it remains true that many are still not facing up to the scourge. Children are raped and often infected. Gender and culture tends to protect the perpetrator and hinder the victim from speaking about what happened to them. Even within households there is domestic and sexual violence. Youngsters aged between 15 and 19 remain the most vulnerable in our country. Among adults, men have 'small houses' and women have 'pain killers' - both of which leave them open to infection and infecting others. Around 2500 people die in Zimbabwe every week of HIV & AIDS related illnesses.

What can we do? If someone is suffering from diabetes or cancer, they can talk about it and their family helps as best it can. But there is a stigma about HIV & AIDS and neither the sufferer nor the family members wish to speak of it. When a person's condition is known people can ignore them and avoid them and they will be slow to employ them, far less invite them to share their food. That is why people don't even want to know their own status. Ninety per cent of our population does not know and this means they cannot take appropriate action when it is needed.

What is my attitude? Do I build people up or do I pull them down? Am I helping our children to see sex as a sacred gift of God to his people, not just something, as someone said, to entertain oneself with when you are tired of study?

Can we pray for ourselves and all God's people? Especially in our parish Eucharists:

Father, you are the giver of life; we are threatened with this illness of HIV & AIDS and we turn to you for help. Help us to be open to this sickness in our country, to its effects on our lives and those of our families. Teach us to accept our brothers and sisters who are suffering and help us to do what we can to share their burden. Lord, hear us.

FIGHT AGAINST THE BANALIZATION OF SEXUALITY

In November, news broke of comments about condoms for HIV prevention that Pope Benedict XVI gave in a book-long interview. The book, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times - A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, was officially released in late November 2010. Questioned about earlier comments on the subject made during a trip to Africa in March 2009, the pope said:

The sheer fixation on the condom implies a banalization of sexuality, which, after all, is precisely the dangerous source of the attitude of no longer seeing sexuality as the expression of love, but only a sort of drug that people administer to themselves. This is why the fight against the banalization of sexuality is also a part of the struggle to ensure that sexuality is treated as a positive value and to enable it to have a positive effect on the whole of man's being.

There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality.

Seewald: Are you saying, then, that the Catholic Church is actually not opposed in principle to the use of condoms?

Pope Benedict: *She of course does not regard it as a real or moral solution, but, in this or that case, there can be nonetheless, in the intention of reducing the risk of infection, a first step in a movement toward a different way, a more human way, of living sexuality.*

Fr Paterne-Auxence Mombé SJ, AJAN Coordinator, writes about the pope's comments: UNAIDS welcomes the pope's statement as a significant and positive step forward taken by the Vatican. Some sections of the international media went on to say that the pope has condoned the use of condoms for HIV prevention, while some others remarked that the position of the Church has not changed. What did the pope really say or mean? Do any of these comments have any implication for the pastoral approach of Church institutions involved in the fight against AIDS?

A close reading of Pope Benedict XVI's comments on condoms shows that he neither made any shift in the Church teaching nor did he justify the use of condoms. He reaffirmed the Church's view, which is that condoms far from resolve the issue of HIV infection, and said: *More needs to happen*. The pope goes on to stress that a fixation on condoms leads to a banalization of sexuality.

And for him, this banalization distorts sexuality, making it appear as a mere product, a *drug that people may administer to themselves*, instead of a positive value with potential to contribute to a person's wholeness. An effective way of fighting HIV infection must integrate the fight against the banalization of sexuality. This point made by the pope poses a question about the perception of sexuality: what is our vision of a sexuality worthy of humanity? In fact, the pope presents the humanization of sexuality as the true way to combat the evil of HIV infection. A condom definitely reduces - not cancels - the risk of HIV transmission; but banalization of sexuality increases vulnerability to HIV infection.

Are there instances in which the use of condoms may be justified? An allusion to a particular circumstance of a male prostitute using a condom specifically to prevent HIV transmission led many to erroneously conclude that the pope condones the use of condoms in some circumstances. What he does is acknowledge the relative moral value of the prostitute showing concern for protecting others by using condoms. But this is far from sufficient. For the pope, it is not the way to HIV prevention. The end does not justify the means.

Are there implications to be drawn from the pope's comments? At the level of theological reflection, the pope has made condoms less of a taboo subject within the Church by speaking freely about them. He has opened the floor to a constructive debate. The consideration of the particular - not to say exceptional - circumstance stimulates deeper theological reflection. The pope, by referring to the case of a moral prostitute, shows that he is fully aware of the type of circumstances that may prompt thinkers and theologians to envision condoning the use of condoms. At the pastoral level, there should not be many implications in the sense that by expressing his view in the context of an interview, the pope did not intend to present a new teaching of the Church on the subject.

Far from reforming the Church's teaching, the pope reiterates it. The core message is: if you want to stop the spread of HIV infection, promote the humanization of sexuality.

EVERY BLESSING OF THE SEASON!

From Fr Paterne Mombé SJ, Ekeno Augustine SJ and all the staff of AJAN House

The African Jesuit AIDS Network wishes you peace and joy this Christmas and throughout the New Year. May the Lord grant you a merry Christmas and a holy, healthy and happy 2011! *Heri ya Krismasi na Mwaka mpya!*

And with special Christmas thanks to AJAN Associate Editor Danielle Vella (Malta); to the translators who, every month throughout 2010, have made it possible for AJANews to communicate across Africa and beyond, and to Stephen Goldring (Canada) who technically supports the monthly transmission of AJANews around the world. Thank you

to all and happy Christmas!

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