

## **SYMPOSIUM OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR**

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### **GREETING FOR WORLD AIDS DAY 2009**

To all our Brothers and Sisters of the Catholic Church in Africa and its Islands, to all men and women of good will, and especially to all who are infected by HIV or affected by AIDS: greetings and best wishes to you all on World AIDS Day 2009. The theme this year "Universal Access and Human Rights" challenges discriminatory laws, policies and practices that stand in the way of access for all to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. This fits well within the theme of the II Synod of Bishops for Africa: *The Church in Africa at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: "You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world."*

The Church is second to none in facing HIV in Africa and caring for people infected and affected. Earlier this year, responding to a journalist en route to the continent, Pope Benedict XVI said: "The most efficient, most truly present player in the fight against AIDS is the Catholic Church herself." And we African Bishops know he is right.

Constantly present among millions of Africans who are badly affected by the pandemic, we see how AIDS continues to ravage our populations, even if it is slipping down the agenda of governments, civil society and international organizations. At a time when official concerns about the pandemic are receding, we re-affirm theologically that the Body of Christ has AIDS, and express our pastoral determination as Family of God to provide fitting responses. For our continent is still the worst afflicted.

We plead for sustained support to meet the needs of many. Assistance is as sorely needed as ever. HIV and AIDS have not gone away, despite premature impressions to the contrary. The assumption that treatment is now available to everyone is false. Only a third of those who need treatment get it and, after two years, only 60% are still on treatment; for every two people on treatment, five are newly infected. Globally new HIV infections are still outnumbering those going on treatment and those dying of AIDS. The number of orphans, abused, vulnerable and infected children continues to grow exponentially. Stigma remains a powerful enemy. The Church knows very well the real impact of HIV and of AIDS upon her sons and daughters, and it will be so for decades to come.

Although ART requires a lifelong commitment to staying on the drugs, in sub-Saharan Africa a goodly number of ART patients stop taking their meds within two

years because they can't afford the regular transport costs to the hospital or don't have access to sufficient food to make drug adherence possible.

The pandemic gravely compromises development and justice. The global recession and economic downturn have a detrimental impact on our brothers and sisters infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. Climbing prices of food and other basic necessities are hampering progress of treatment, because people cannot afford the food essential to support their medication. Further, increased hunger and desperation are making people resort to sex as a means of survival. So any response that attempts to tackle HIV and AIDS in isolation is doomed to fail.

For the tide to turn, the impact of all contributing factors must be recognised and tackled holistically: wars; fragile or failing states; inequality between men and women; the ravages of climate change and many more. All these make the poor even poorer, more dispossessed, more vulnerable to HIV and, if infected, more likely to develop AIDS.

HIV-AIDS is not just a medical problem and investing in pharmaceuticals alone will not work. Foreign governments and UN agencies are now pushing for investment in national healthcare systems in countries of Africa as their strategy for addressing HIV along with malaria and tuberculosis.

With the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, we seriously warn that the problem cannot be overcome by relying exclusively or primarily on the distribution of prophylactics. Only a strategy based on education to individual responsibility in the framework of a moral view of human sexuality, especially through conjugal fidelity, can have a real impact on the prevention of this disease.

The Church's understanding of marriage as the total, reciprocal and exclusive communion of love between a man and a woman prompts the most effective behaviours for preventing the sexual transmission of disease: namely, abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage.

We address ourselves particularly to our youth, in whom we firmly believe. Let no one deceive you into thinking that you cannot control yourself. Abstinence is the best protection. For those who are not married, it is also the only moral course of action. Accordingly, formation of the human person is the true recipe, the key to it all, and we are intent on preparing you to be tomorrow's salt of the earth and light of the world, active, generous and responsible members of society and Church.

SECAM thanks all those who are so generously involved in this difficult apostolate of formation, love and care.

May international Catholic solidarity continue supporting the long-term commitment of the Church in Africa to raise awareness, to accompany the infected and the affected, to form the youth, and to face this great challenge – along with many others – in a spirit of inclusivity, reconciliation, and greater harmony in families, communities, parishes and all dimensions of Church life.

May our Holy Mother Mary, Queen of Africa and Health of the Sick, intercede for us at the throne of grace. Amen.

+ Polycarp Cardinal Pengo  
Archbishop of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania  
President of SECAM

World AIDS Day, 1 December 2009