

AIDS DAY CELEBRATION LANSDOWNE 28TH NOVEMBER 2010

The terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS continues in our country seemingly unabated. There are many tragedies surrounding this disease: the stigma attached to it, the frightening opportunistic diseases that infect people, the break-up of families and relationships, the orphans who are left behind when parents die, the deaths particularly of young people who simply should not be facing death in the prime of their life.

Perhaps the greatest of all tragedies is that after so many years, we have not been able to turn the tide. While the South African government claims that the incidence of new infections is decreasing, other sources question those statistics. Whatever the truth, there is no doubt that the number of new infections is unacceptably high.

Few people can claim not to have knowledge about HIV and how it is spread. Government has embarked on massive programmes of educating especially young people. Many NGOs and other members of civil society – including the Church – have also embarked on education and prevention programmes.

Until recently, the Government's message has been characterized by the slogan "condomize". The Church's message has been abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage. By and large, neither message has been adhered to. The number of teenage pregnancies, and the increased number of abortions, both testify that many people have not listened to the condomize message. Equally, they have not listened to the Church's message of abstinence and fidelity. It is difficult to understand why there is such a gap between knowledge and changing behaviour. Is it because people have a fatalistic attitude? Is it because the sub-human standard of living that most of our people endure makes them feel helpless and hopeless – that they feel powerless over the course of their lives or over their destinies? What must be done to change that? A quote from the film "The Shawshank Redemption": 'fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free'. The Church's intervention on the whole area of HIV and AIDS is primarily to give people hope, and that things don't have to be as they are – we do have the power to change.

Anti-retrovirals have dramatically changed the lives of many people. While ARVs have severe side-effects experienced by some people, nonetheless they have given people a new lease on life. There are dangers, though. If people stop taking their medication, or hospitals run out of anti-retrovirals, a more resistant strain of the Virus is likely to develop. Numerous efforts have been made to find a cure for AIDS or a vaccine. There have been some advances but it seems we are still a long way off from developing either. Ultimately, prevention must be achieved by changing behaviour.

It is in this context that we welcome the recent comments made by the Holy Father regarding condoms. The comments have evoked wild speculation in the media, some even suggesting that the Church is doing a "U-turn" not only on the use of condoms but also contraceptives, others that it opens the way for a more open sexuality in the Church. The fact is that many do not seem to understand what the Church is teaching. I would like to make the following points:

1. Our sexuality is a God-given gift that when properly lived and integrated into our lives leads to our development and actualization as human-beings;

2. One of the most profound and deepest experiences of our humanity is the ability of a man and woman to enter into a lasting and committed relationship where the two sexes complement and complete each other into becoming more fully human;
3. When sexuality is viewed only as a physical need to be gratified, it becomes trivialized and distorted as a selfish pursuit of pleasure and entertainment, that de-humanises people and risks great injustice especially to the more vulnerable who may be used or even abused; just one of many examples is the passing of pornographic pictures or videos of people on mixt or between cell phones;
4. The present “highly-sexed” culture in which we live promotes a shallow and physical understanding of sexuality that excludes the emotional, spiritual and developmental aspects. The massive pornography industry perpetuates this understanding of sex. While many married people use contraceptives not because they wish to live promiscuous lives but rather because they see it as a pragmatic solution to economic and other difficulties, it cannot be denied that the mass availability of contraceptives has greatly contributed to a promiscuous culture which in turn has certainly contributed to the spread of HIV and AIDS;
5. The contraceptive culture has contributed to a number of negative social consequences. This is so on three levels: the intrapersonal level where I suggest there is an increasing number of people feel alienated and alone. One can seriously question whether some are losing their ability to form intimate long-term relationships. Secondly, on the inter-personal level, for example the difficulty of being able to trust others in a culture of multi-partner relationships. Thirdly on the level of society this culture has had an enormous impact on fidelity, family life in general. Even in terms of changing demographics witnessed by the negative population growth rate of certain Western countries, which may well bring about enormous changes to the world as we know it.
6. There are other consequences. Much more research needs to be done into the biological effects of chemical contraceptives and the correlation between those and a changing relationship between men and women, to say nothing of the medical effects.
7. It is clear that the Church does not and cannot promote the use of contraceptives including condoms. It is re-discovering the dignity, beauty and true meaning of sexuality, and its proper use, that will bring about a real solution, not only to HIV/AIDS, but to other social ills as well. This is part of the “humanizing” of sexuality.
8. As the clarification issued by the Vatican states, the Holy Father re-affirmed the dignity of sexuality and it is clear that he does not regard condoms as a real or moral solution to AIDS. He gave an example of an exceptional situation where the life of a partner may be at risk. At no time does he justify the morally disordered exercise of sexuality, but the use of a condom to diminish the risk of passing on infection may be “a first assumption of responsibility”, a first movement towards a more human sexuality. This is not revolutionary as some have claimed and should be seen in the context of a call away from impoverishment and the evil consequences of promiscuity and a disordered use of sexuality, to a human sexuality more faithful to the God-given gift.

HIV challenges us – as Christians – on many fronts. Firstly, there is the continued stigma that is attached to those who are positive, very often causing people not to reveal their status for fear of being rejected. They live with the burden of their condition in loneliness and anxiety. Some even fear that it may be a punishment from God. As Christians and Catholics, we accept any person with the Virus as a brother or sister, without judgement or “wondering how they became infected”. As with any other person who battles a disease, we treat those with full-blown AIDS as a person who is in need of compassion, support and hope.

Secondly, we are challenged on how to make our support of sufferers practically – through Home-Based Care, care of orphans and vulnerable children, advocacy, education, counselling, and so on. Thank God, the Church is able to do these, albeit on a limited scale.

The biggest challenge of all is the question of prevention. Particularly, how can people – especially young people – be empowered to make changes in their lives. This disease can be beaten. We can turn back the tide. And yet, there seems to be a lethargy or apathy among our people – an inability to take control of their lives and to believe that, at least to a certain extent, they can control their destiny. It is important to understand the reason for this lethargy or apathy. Socio-economic conditions almost certainly have something to do with it – the continued poverty, lack of opportunity, lack of hope for the future that so many still experience. A disordered understanding and practice of sexuality certainly has a lot to do with it. With regard to the last point it is imperative that we renew our efforts towards an energetic education in the beauty of human sexuality – not “sex education” that government or NGOs may talk about, but an education that leads people to appreciate and use this great gift in an appropriate way.