

### **Pastoral prescription for HIV/AIDS: ministration and compassion**

From Day One of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the Catholic Church has been delivering health care, charity and understanding, says Rev. THOMAS ROSICA

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As head of a Catholic Media Foundation, and the Salt and Light Catholic Television Network in Canada, I often hear: What does the Roman Catholic Church say about AIDS? (The question usually means, "What is the hierarchy saying?")

There are also underlying questions: Why is the church allowing AIDS to spread by rejecting the use of condoms? Is HIV/AIDS a form of divine punishment? How should I respond to my child, relative, neighbour, colleague who is HIV positive? Besides suffering from HIV/AIDS, why do so many people suffer prejudice and rejection, even from other Catholics? What is the Church doing about this worldwide pandemic?

The Catholic Church has spoken consistently, clearly and powerfully about HIV/AIDS. The Church continues to make her contribution, both in prevention and in caring for people afflicted by HIV/AIDS and their families, at the level of medical care and assistance, and at the social, spiritual and pastoral levels.

About 27 per cent of the world's centres that provide care in relation to HIV/AIDS are Catholic-based. From Day One of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the Catholic Church has been delivering health care, compassion, charity and understanding.

When governments and agencies took their blessed time to assess the crisis and respond to it in its early years, Mother Teresa of Calcutta opened hospices throughout the world for people with HIV/AIDS. She and her sisters made no distinction in those who still find refuge in her AIDS hospices.

Based on the Bible and on the Church's long tradition, and especially on the life of Jesus, the Church's teachings have stressed the value and dignity of every person, the rights and responsibilities of society, and the love and compassion of God.

And yet the role of the Church in the midst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been met with vehement debate and disagreement, especially in three areas: the understanding of human sexuality, strategies for HIV/AIDS prevention, and social justice. Service and social justice are an integral part of the Church's response to AIDS. This is why the Church combines pastoral ministry with health care, the exercise of compassion, and spiritual support; with personal morality, social ethics, and education for prevention.

Long before HIV/AIDS was identified, the Church's teachings about heterosexuality and homosexuality were being questioned. The Church's continued emphasis on holding together the procreative and unitive dimensions of sexual intercourse only in the context of marriage receives little support from cultures that trivialize human sexuality. We are part of one of those cultures, whether we wish to admit it or not.

The Church's social teachings have also been rejected by many people since long before HIV/AIDS. Economic, political, and social powers do not easily grasp the values of the gospel. Economic justice for all people and the end of oppression are urgently needed to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS. The pandemic continues to devastate the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

Populations are being wiped out in Africa because of the disease. In each situation, the Church calls people to live and act as informed citizens and faithful disciples of Christ.

One of the most tragic aspects about HIV/AIDS is the almost universal stigma and discrimination based on ignorance, fear, sheer prejudice, and a strong tendency to see HIV/AIDS as being a problem "out there," which somebody else has. People living with HIV/AIDS face discrimination that is dehumanizing, and suffering that strips the person's sense of worth and dignity. The Church teaches that all forms of discrimination are wrong, whether in housing, jobs, insurance, education, health care or religion.

HIV/AIDS is a human illness and not a punishment from God. The virus causes great suffering and death. Church teachings address this sober reality and neither

# BIOETHICS MATTERS

play down the immensity of the suffering, nor promote a passive acceptance. Rather, the teachings urge all Christians to model their lives after Jesus of Nazareth, trusting in God, bringing comfort to those in need, and confronting oppressive structures and situations.


The threat of HIV/AIDS does not change the Church's morality -- which is founded upon the Sacred Scriptures and 2,000 years of tradition -- but the spread of the virus makes it more urgent for the Church to transmit and communicate its morality to the faithful, particularly to the young, and to those who, explicitly or implicitly, share Christian values. In order to combat HIV/AIDS in a responsible manner, the Church teaches respect for the sacred value of life and a correct approach to sexuality.

If the Church and her pastoral leaders and members offer compassion and consolation without considering the structures of sin, or preach morality and prevention without combating poverty, this is tantamount to scorning the tradition of the Church and denying its mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God, in which suffering, sin and death are defeated forever.

Following Jesus' example, the Church calls the faithful to disinterested, service-oriented love, and thus to the fullness of life for people of every sex, orientation, race, nationality, language and culture.

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## STUDY GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

**1. In what way does our culture trivialize sexuality?**

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**2. Why are the social teachings of the Church rejected by so many?**

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**3. What is “the correct approach to sexuality” that the Church teaches?**

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**4. Reflections:**

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