MESSAGE FOR THE WORLD AIDS DAY  

December 1, 2006  

Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise  

From Stigma and Silence to Dignity and Solidarity

1. Reflecting on the theme of the World AIDS Day, ‘Stop AIDS: Keep the Promise’, many faces of people living with HIV and AIDS came to my mind spontaneously, especially of those whom I know personally who suffer much from the stigma and discrimination which are linked with the disease. It reminded me then the voice of God heard by Moses from a burning bush on Mount Horeb: “I have seen the affliction of my people...and I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings, and have come down to deliver them...! Come, I will send you ... to bring forth the people! And, I will be with you!” (Ex. 3: 7, 8, 12) This verse aptly sums up God’s concern and compassion for the suffering and the afflicted. It is this same message that we reflect during this holy season of Advent that prepares us for the celebration of Christmas, the birth of the Saviour. Incidentally, the World AIDS Day coincides with the beginning of Advent. In solidarity with my sisters and brothers who experience pain and dejection, as the Chairman of the Commission for Health of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, I would like to reflect with you, on the issue of stigma and untold suffering of the people living with HIV and our response as members of one human family.

2. Since the identification of the first instance of HIV in India in 1986, the rate of infection is increasing at an alarming rate to reach 5.17 million people by September 2006, with an adult prevalence rate of 0.9 per cent. Considering the size of India’s population, even a decimal point increase in the nation’s HIV prevalence would add about half a million new individuals to the total HIV cases. We cannot afford to ignore this imminent peril, when a large section of people are highly vulnerable to such diseases due to high level of poverty, ignorance, widespread gender discrimination and emerging risky life-style.
3. The epidemic has created an inexplicable burden for so many individuals, families and communities. A relief from this condition requires improved health care, better access to antiretroviral treatment, and other essential medications, greater value-based prevention efforts, more effective social outreach, and support for those most vulnerable, particularly orphans. There have been indeed commendable efforts both from the side of the Government and religious and community organizations, though still it remains inadequate to reach out to everyone. But there is another terrible burden imposed by HIV and AIDS, which each and every one of us has the capacity to relieve: the burden of HIV-related stigma.

4. It is totally unjustifiable and unacceptable that people living with HIV are being denied basic rights such as medical care, food or shelter, and dismissed from jobs they are perfectly fit to perform. Some are shunned from their community, or most tragic of all, by their own family. The isolation and lack of support it imposes, deeply hurts those who suffer from it. It should hurt every one of us, for it is an offense to our common humanity and basic dignity of each individual, `created in the image and likeness of God’ (Cf. Gen. 1:27). We recall the words of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, who said, “A person infected by HIV is Jesus among us. How can we say `no’ to Him?”

5. The impact of stigma can be as detrimental as the virus itself. The fear of stigma leads to silence, and when it comes to fighting AIDS, silence can result in tragic consequences. It suppresses public discussion about AIDS, and deters people from finding out whether they are infected. It can lead people -- whether a mother breastfeeding her child or a sexual partner reluctant to disclose their HIV status -- to the risk of transmitting HIV. They have to hide themselves fearing unfavourable reaction from the public. Often the self-imposed stigma and shame hold people back from getting tested. Ignorance of one’s status fuels the epidemic. It is imperative that we break the walls of stigma and silence.

6. The HIV and AIDS Policy of the Catholic Church in India clearly states that “we do not approve any sort of discrimination or hostility directed against people living with HIV and AIDS, which is unjust and immoral.” (p. 11) The compassionate God whom we believe says, “I have seen the affliction of my people…and I have heard their cry…I know their sufferings, and
God’s voice inspires us to live in solidarity and compassion with the sick and the suffering, and do everything to comfort, strengthen and empower them.

7. “I will be with you!” (Mt. 28:20) – These are the consoling words of Jesus, as Emmanuel. This faith is our strength. It empowers the sick. It encourages the care-givers. Going in line with the HIV and AIDS Policy of the Church, let us make sure, that in our institutions and programmes, “there will be no discrimination in matters of admission and treatment of people living with or affected by HIV. They will be treated with compassionate respect and with a non-judgmental attitude.” (p. 33) Personnel in all departments will be suitably trained and oriented to assist them.

8. We need to end the silence about HIV. Leaders of communities – Bishops, priests, and lay faithful - and heads of families, need to speak openly about HIV and AIDS in our gatherings and family get-togethers so that people are properly informed about it and acquire positive attitudes of respect and care for them. Programmes are to be initiated in the parishes, schools, workplaces, etc., especially for the youth, which will facilitate to create a generation better equipped to live in the world of AIDS, which includes integrated counseling and voluntary testing. In all our programmes we need to assure the active participation and greater involvement of the people living with HIV and AIDS. I appeal to everyone to make the best use of the training programmes available, especially the study programmes like, “HIV and Family Education” developed by the CBCI-IGNOU Chair on Health and Social Welfare.

9. It is so encouraging to learn that the support groups and network of people living with HIV, facilitated in some dioceses offer great solace and strength to its members. Only by interpersonal interaction and by eliminating stigma, we will be able to help people have better access to care, treatment and positive living. We have to reassure those who disclose their positive status that they can live without fear, and also receive legal protection when they are at risk of loosing adequate medical care, home and property, as it happens sometimes. Obviously, these are basic human rights, which every Christian is called to respect. I earnestly request the Diocesan Social Service Departments and other developmental agencies to create more job
opportunities for people living with HIV so that they may integrate themselves into the mainstream of the community and live more dignified lives. Another important concern is the education of the children living with HIV, who are often marginalized in society. The General Body of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India stated in February this year, “Those disadvantaged, socially, physically or intellectually, will be specially assisted so that they can be integrated into the educational system. We make this preferential option, even if academic results suffer, in the process. All Catholic schools are expected to participate in this project.” (CBCI, 27th General Body on ‘Education and Concern for the Marginalized’, Final Statement, Feb. 2006, p.8.3)

10. Pastoral care is at the heart of the Church’s ministry for the sick, which includes the sacramental assistance to the Catholic patients. The compassionate spiritual care, given to people who are going through difficult times, helps them to draw on the resources of their faith and trust in God. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation one will experience the merciful and life-giving love of God, and it will transform the self-destructive feelings of guilt and fear into self-confidence for a life of love and sharing. The Eucharist will nourish us for fullness of life and will challenge us to bear witness to Christ’s sacrificial love. The Anointing of the Sick remains always the Sacrament of strength, healing and wholeness. Moreover, it reminds us of the never-ceasing mission of caring for the sick and the suffering in all its various forms. The HIV pandemic presents the Church in India with a challenge to become a genuine healing and reconciling community, boldly bearing witness to the truth, which is handed on through its teachings, yet unafraid to examine its own practices, and revealing to the people of our day the compassionate love of God.

11. The HIV crisis is of such great magnitude that its impact on humanity cannot be tackled by any one single agency. We remember the words of Pope John Paul II of happy memory, who said, “The battle against AIDS ought to be everyone’s battle!” Collaboration and networking between all stakeholders, - Government, civil society groups and people of other Faiths, are important without ignoring ethical concerns and values. On January 6, 2007, we plan to launch the Second Phase of the “Church’s Concerted Response to HIV and AIDS”, bringing together our health and developmental organizations, like the CBCI Commission for Health, Catholic
Health Association of India, Catholic Nurses Guild, Sister Doctors’ Forum, Caritas-India, Catholic Medical Mission Board, CRS, institutions like St John’s National Academy of Health Sciences and different Religious Congregations. This Second Phase is aimed at the implementation of the Policy recommendations, particularly to train more healthcare personnel and community leaders, especially the youth.

12. Let us all join hands to contain the further spread of HIV and its ravages on people. It is our commitment and our promise: to stop AIDS! Advent is the season which brings hope to sustain all such struggles of ours. Emmanuel, God-with-us sees the affliction of his people, hears their cries, and knows their suffering and comes down to liberate them. His liberative presence is experienced in and through the community, in our solidarity with one another. I entrust all those who are living with HIV and their care-givers to the maternal love of Mary, the mother of Jesus, model of unfailing hope and cause of our joy. May the Babe of Bethlehem bring serenity and strength to work for a human family where no one is discriminated against, but everyone is accepted and respected as members of one human family.

Yours in Jesus, the Divine Healer

+ Archbishop Bernard Moras,
  Archbishop of Bangalore and
  Chairman, Commission for Healthcare

CBCI Centre, New Delhi
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Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India

For further information, for copies of the poster; Policy on HIV and AIDS; Policy on Health and the Journal “Health in Abundance”, kindly write to:

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