

Towards holistic HIV/AIDS awareness in Papua New Guinea: a Catholic pastoral perspective

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Abstract

A lot has been said, written and done about HIV/AIDS in Papua New Guinea. However, it seems that more or less, the 'output' is far less than the 'input'. Some people claim that the stance and insistence of the Catholic Church on holiness and abstinence are doing more harm than good in the fight against the epidemic. This paper disagrees and tries to argue that the reverse is the case, and that the best approach will be a holistic, value-centred approach that will recognise, emphasize and contextualize our integral human sexuality.

Introduction

The issue of HIV/AIDS has always been something very distant for me. That was until one beautiful Thursday evening in 2000 when a couple I was to wed the following Saturday - with everything ready - came in to tell me that they were cancelling the wedding. The reason? The bride had tested positive to HIV. For a brief moment that seemed like eternity, I suddenly realised that I did not know what to say. As I stood there staring at the man, he gathered himself, apologised for taking my time and turned to go. I followed him out to his car where the bride was waiting, eyes red with weeping. The only thing I could say was, 'I am sorry'.

The following day the girl (a beautiful accounting graduate with a dream job) came back to see me on her own. As she entered the presbytery living room, we locked each other in a very warm embrace, and eyes full of tears, she asked me a question that I simply refused to answer, a question that will continue to reverberate in my memory for a very long time: 'Father, does it mean that I will never marry?'

That was my first encounter with HIV/AIDS. Thus, with that momentous encounter, HIV/AIDS became a person. It suddenly had a human face. It became a living reality to me: a recognizable phenomenon.

The epidemic has come to stay and nobody can pretend not to be involved. As Pope John Paul II rightly put it, 'the drama of AIDS threatens not just nations or societies, but the whole of humanity. It knows no frontiers of geography, race, age or social condition' (Pope John Paul II, 1990, p.2).

In the same vein, the World Council of Churches reported that:

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is not just a matter of statistics. Its effects are impoverishing people, breaking their hearts, causing violations of their human rights and wrecking havoc upon their bodies and spirits. ... In a striking way, HIV/AIDS has become a 'spotlight', revealing many iniquitous conditions in our personal and community lives, revealing our inhumanity to one another, our broken relationships and unjust structures. It reveals the tragic consequences of personal actions which directly harm others, or of negligence which opens people to additional risk.

(World Council of Churches, 2002, p.97)

A lot has been said and continues to be said on the subject. Governments and donor agencies are providing huge sums of money for HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaigns. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), local Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are actively pursuing donor funds for their HIV/AIDS programs.

However, despite all the awareness and prevention campaigns, the epidemic is on the rise. More and more people are getting infected everyday. What then is the problem? Does it mean that people are not getting the message or are they being given the wrong one? Or do they not care at all?

In a very particular way, criticism has occurred about the position of the Catholic Church on the issue. Some, without knowing or even caring to know the central theme in the stance of the Church on the use of condoms as preventive measure, accuse the Catholic Church of being behind the epidemic. It is as if the argument about condoms has drowned the message itself. Abstinence or faithfulness which the Church insist on find their roots in our beings as people created for a purpose.

In this paper, I would like to clarify the issue that the Church is not and can never be the cause of the exploding HIV/AIDS epidemic in Papua New Guinea. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in their plenary assembly in April 2001, declared that

the Catholic Church with its extensive network of parishes and village community churches, as well as educational institutions and health facilities, has much to offer in the fight to overcome ignorance about HIV/AIDS...We desire to participate fully with government and other groups in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

(CBC PNG SI Plenary, April 2001, p.15)

HIV/AIDS awareness in PNG today

Many NGOs (both international and local) are actively involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns in PNG today. Through various means they intend to reach as many people as possible to educate them on the dangers of the epidemic.

Here, in a nutshell, I will like to look at what some of them claim to be doing in the fight. I will like to state clearly that the choice of these NGOs, was arbitrarily made, and also predicated on the fact that they have a global reach, clout and experience. And so, the exercise is not to criticize but simply to look at what they are doing in the 'field' with regard to the epidemic.

One of such NGOs – the Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) – through their Tokaut AIDS Project Baseline Report, outlined their main activities amongst others as:

- Awareness Community Theatre (ACT) programme to tackle stigma and prejudice
- Capacity building of local NGOs and Government organisations to improve their ability to deliver essential services and to enable them to mainstream HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention into their programs
- School based HIV/AIDS awareness programs
- Awareness sensitization programs with local business

(Levy 2005, p.2)

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) through its Asia and Near East Regional HIV/AIDS and Infectious Diseases program provides enormous support to PNG. At present, through the Family Health International IMPACT Project, USAID focuses on diminishing HIV prevalence in at-risk groups and preventing the further spread of HIV into the general population by

- Increasing quality, availability and access to information and service in order to change sexual risk behaviours and cultural norms;
- Enhancing quality, availability and access to prevention and management of sexually transmitted infections;
- Improving the availability of and capacity to generate and use data to monitor and evaluate the prevalence trend of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections and program impact.

(USAID, 2004)

World Vision is involved in HIV/AIDS prevention, supporting people living with HIV/AIDS and providing alternative employment opportunities in PNG. Through their 'Positive Living with HIV/AIDS' project set up in 2004, World Vision trains people in life skills, facilitates them to access medical and social services, provides drop-in centre and promotes HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention through a variety of media (World Vision, 2005).

Some other agencies like AusAID, Oxfam Community AID Abroad through HELP Resources are also actively involved through finance and personnel in the HIV/AIDS awareness.

The national government of Papua New Guinea is actively involved also. In recognition of the potential danger of HIV/AIDS to the country, the national government in December 1997, through an Act of Parliament established the National AIDS Council (NAC) and its Secretariat. Through the National HIV/AIDS Medium-Term Plan, the government advocated for a strong multi-

sectoral approach to the epidemic. Under the plan, the priority areas selected for action are:

- Focused behaviour change programs and services for sex workers, adolescents and young people
- HIV/AIDS education and information, including mass media;
- Improvement in the HIV and sexually-transmitted infection research management and expansion of the multi-sectoral response;
- Community based care and support programs.

(NAC Submission 3, 2005, p.10)

In furtherance of the above objectives the NAC being a multi-sectoral committee is comprised of representatives from the government departments, the Council of Churches, the National Council of Women, the Chamber of Commerce, NGOs, and People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA)

The Minister for Social Development – Dame Carol Kidu – recently suggested the setting up of ‘adult entertainment centres’ in an effort to combat the epidemic.

From the foregoing it is obvious that many HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention activities are already in place. But the question then is, looking at the calibre of the stakeholders and the enormous resources, their avowed goals and objectives with regard to the HIV/AIDS awareness, how come so few people are still knowledgeable about the disease? Why is the epidemic on the rise? Who is the target group in all the awareness campaigns?

In a random sample of students at Divine Word University, questions were asked such as, ‘What message did you hear about HIV/AIDS?’, ‘What do you know personally about HIV/AIDS?’, or, ‘Have you ever attended an AIDS awareness program?’. It was somehow disappointing to know that the majority did not have a clear message about HIV/AIDS. They had misguided perceptions of the disease that ranged from HIV/AIDS being a curse from either God or Satan for sinful and reckless sexual behaviours (the majority held this view); HIV/AIDS being a town disease’ and not a ‘village disease’, to being a sign that the ‘end’ is near.

Only a few were able to say that AIDS in PNG is an incurable disease mainly spread through sex. Asked whether they had attended any HIV/AIDS awareness campaign, the majority gave a ‘no’ answer. A handful admitted to having witnessed or participated in an awareness campaign where the emphasis was a ‘demonstration of how to fit a condom on an over-sized wooden penis’, admitting that the overall emphasis was on the use of condoms as a preventive device.

Where we are at the moment

The Post Courier Newspaper (Monday 18, July, 2005, p. 5) gave the following statistics about HIV/AIDS in PNG.

There have been 11,139 people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS infection since 1987 to Dec. 31 last year (2004). Of this, 5,363 were male (48%) and 5,129 female (46%) and 647 (6%) individuals whose sex was not stated. Of the 11,130 diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, 1,926 were with an AIDS defining illness at the time of diagnosis, 1,374 people classified with HIV/AIDS infection; 7,839 individuals remained unclassified and 353 deaths were reported. In 2000, it was estimated that a total number of HIV infected persons in the country was in the range of 10,000 to 15,000.

The above in a nutshell, tells us the state of the epidemic in PNG today. On paper, it does not look too serious. After all, one might argue, it is only 11,000 in a population of nearly 5 million. But, when we consider the fact that perhaps for every case reported, there may be about 20 or more others not reported, we might begin to appreciate the enormity of the problem.

So, considering the massive resources deployed – both financial and human – and all the hype relative to other health issues, why the alarming increase? Given that the major mode of transmission of HIV/AIDS is heterosexual sex, it would seem reasonable to suppose that that the virus is spreading so quickly because of the level of sexual activity or the range of partners.

Going through some of the material on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention in PNG, it is disturbing to note that some stakeholders tend to blame the Catholic Church for the spread of the disease in PNG. Citing the Church's insistence on abstinence and its stance against the use of condoms as a preventive device, they tend to give the impression that if the Church could only 'lift the ban' on the use of condoms, then the epidemic would be arrested.

Lending his academic support to the issue, Allan Patience¹ in his article 'Developing a Healthy PNG', after masterfully presenting some of the problems associated with condom use in PNG, stretched the argument a little bit farther by saying that 'future historians may even interpret the Church's teaching on condoms as a form of murder, possibly genocide' (Patience, undated, p.4).

It may be considered that aspersions being cast on the Catholic Church on the issue of condoms as a prevention against HIV/AIDS proceed out of ignorance of the Church's teaching on integral human sexuality.

Towards a holistic HIV/AIDS awareness in Papua New Guinea

The advances in science over the past century have been monumental to the extent that human beings have become the measure of all things, the final arbiter. So many believe today that human intelligence alone, is necessary to

¹ Allan Patience is an Australian Professor in Political Science at the University of PNG and Victoria University, Melbourne. He is a regular commentator on several national issues.

understand and unravel the dignity and destiny of humankind. Any truth not arrived at through scientific observation and experimentation is laughable and not deemed fit for 'human consumption'. Truths arrived at by religious revelation are for the 'unlettered', those who cannot think for themselves. 'How can you still believe in such things?'

However, when it comes to the issue of morality, the application of scientific method becomes highly deficient for the simple reason that moral actions proceed from the core of our being. Thus, moral judgments cannot be arbitrarily made, for within our consciences, within the core and essence of our beings, we discover a law not made by us, so compelling, but which as of necessity we must obey, a law that is objective and universal, inscribed by God who established it, 'by which God orders, directs and governs the whole world and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in his wisdom and love (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 29 Dec 1975, p.487).

It is on this divine, eternal, objective and universal law that can be perceived by human reason and accessible to our minds called the Natural Law² that the Catholic Church bases her teachings on morality.

The basic idea of natural law is that everything that exists has a nature and the purpose of all things is to function in accordance with that nature. Deontology – from which Natural Law is derived – 'starts from duties and obligations and follows pre-established principles (van der Poel, Cssp, 2001, p.4). The Decalogue (The Ten Commandments), which forms the primary basis of Christian morality, is an example of this deontological approach. Our actions are either right or wrong in themselves regardless of consequences. Effects and experience have little influence upon the value of the principle as 'the responsibility is derived from a situation and/or condition (or authority) that exists outside the agent, structures and rules being primary' (van der Poel, Cssp, 2001, p.21).

Based on the foregoing, therefore, the Church proclaims and insists on certain moral truths. Without downplaying the importance of a well-formed conscience in moral decision-making, so many today erroneously assert that 'in conscience' they cannot accept the views and teachings of the Church on such things like sex.

However, the plurality of perspectives notwithstanding today, 'it is wrong to assert as many do today that neither human nature nor revealed law provide any absolute and unchangeable norms as a guide for individual actions, that all they offer is the general law of charity and respect of the human person' (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975, p.488).

² The moral laws discovered through natural law are universal and eternal and are knowable by all through reason and reflection. They can thus be used to judge individuals, societies and human civil laws. Civil laws or individual behaviours that are not in consonance with natural law are considered ethically impermissible.

In other words, some claim that the teachings of the Church based on natural law and the sacred scriptures in such matters as sex and condoms are culture and time bound, prescriptive, rather than normative. However, since sex as a human experiential phenomenon has to do with human and Christian life, the teachings of the Church are just as correct, true, objective, normative, universal and appropriate. Thus, the Church has never wavered in her teaching based on Holy Scripture that 'only in legitimate marriage does the use of the sexual faculty find its true meaning and its probity' (O'Rourke and Boyle, 1993, p.295).

And that is the problem! Christians generally, especially teenagers and the unmarried, face a lot of dialectical conflicts when it comes to the area of sex. It seems many believe that there is an inverse relationship between our human ontological experiences and the moral and ethical vision of Jesus (the Church) in the area of sex. Faced with this dialectical conflict, many tend to follow their own 'consciences' and the idea that sex is an end in itself instead of a means to an end. In the name of being in love or having perhaps the firm intention to marry, for example, why shouldn't people engage in sex?

Without overstating the obvious, this idea is against the Church's teaching which maintains that sexual intercourse as an expression of love can only take place within the context of a marriage to achieve the essence of its own purpose. Thus, human sexuality as a gift from God the creator can only be enjoyed within the context of a permanent, monogamous and heterosexual commitment that is open to new life.

It is on this basis, therefore, that the Church unequivocally and fearlessly advocates for sexual abstinence for the unmarried and fidelity for the married.

However, it is pertinent to state that nobody can underestimate the positive power of sex in our lives. There is a sense today in which people feel that the Church's idea of sex is too negative and 'dirty' and often runs completely counter to peoples' lived experiences. This, of course, is very far from the truth, for the Church has always taught that sexual love with its creative force, is a deep and mysterious experience that has a wonderful capacity to develop and strengthen the two people involved. Its potential to hurt and dehumanize when wrongly used is also tremendous.

Nevertheless, we must accept the fact that it is extremely difficult to find a balance when talking to young people about the 'no' of premarital sex. Most often, in an effort to discourage them from casual and premarital sex, we tend to create fear, as we often concentrate more on the negative things that can arise like contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or causing unwanted pregnancies. Whether these can serve as a deterrent remains to be seen, but it suffices to say that these things are all very well known to all who want to engage in sex, but they hardly succeed in serving as a deterrent.

Besides, there is also the added problem to the young when we become too puritanical, idealistic and removed when talking about the authentic meaning of marital sex that we then fail to confront the young people's everyday existential problems. I think the best alternative will be to base our morality on sex not so much on what is wrong, or what can go wrong, in immoral and illicit sexual encounters, but rather upon what is good in moral and licit sexual acts. We do not tell people not to steal because they might be caught or shot at, but that it is wrong to take what does not belong to you. The same invariably applies to sexual morality.

And that underlines the importance of a value based moral education that emphasizes and helps us to understand that there is a purpose for our lives that transcends the immediate, the here and now. We do not engage in immoral acts not necessarily because of the physical consequences, but rather because of the values we believe in.

Papua New Guinea is a Christian country. Statistics show that 97.3% of the PNG population is Christian. It is also one of the most evangelised nations with 2,221 foreign missionaries working in the country (Roth, 2002). As heterosexual sex is the biggest mode of transmission of HIV in PNG, it then raises the big question of catechesis on the part of the Churches, a fact brought out by the same author above, who, while lamenting the ferocious rise of the epidemic in Papua New Guinea questioned,

What on earth are Church leaders teaching their 97.3% flock (or is the problem all the fault of the other 2.7%)? What messages are the missionaries bringing? Should I be directing my tithes elsewhere? Or should I just sit back content in the knowledge that so many are going to heaven?

(Roth, 2002).

Well, the Catholic Church's teaching has always been consistent. The Church teaches abstinence, chastity and holiness; the Church says 'no' to casual, premarital or extra-marital sex; the Church preaches against promiscuity. But unfortunately the voice of the Church has been drowned in an ocean of relativism, the message distorted in the name of individual freedom and the messengers contradicted in a wave of antagonistic dissent. Who needs and listens to the Church today, especially in the area of sex?

The Catholic Church and condoms

But what does the Catholic Church say about condoms *per se*? It is pertinent to note that the Church's teaching on condoms has always been consistent over time, even before the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic – that the condom, being a contraceptive device, like other contraceptive devices - has no place in marital sexuality. So, the argument *per se* is not about whether condoms work or not, whether they are effective or not or whether they can or cannot allow the virus to pass through. It is also not about whether condoms are evil. No,

because condoms as things are not evil in and of themselves. What makes a condom 'evil' is what it is used for. As Martin Rhonheimer (2004, p.10) asserts, 'condoms cannot be intrinsically evil, only human acts. Condoms are not human acts but things'.

In other words, the Church's teaching is not about condoms *per se* but about marital love and the marital meaning of authentic human sexuality. Thus, the assertion that in the face of the rising HIV/AIDS epidemic that the Church should 'relax the ban' on condoms (or be accused of genocide) misses and confuses the argument.

Condoms and what if questions

Proponents of condom use for HIV/AIDS prevention ask a lot of 'what if ...' questions in a bid to twist and fault the Church's teaching. The usual questions often go like these: What if people are promiscuous? What if the man is HIV positive and wants sex; can't he be allowed to use condoms to at least protect his wife? What if the woman discovers that her husband is highly promiscuous and is at risk of HIV infection; can't she be allowed to insist on the use of condoms? How about prostitutes?

Before I try to answer the above questions, let me narrate again a real life story about how, for the first time I came in contact pastorally with condoms.

Jane (not her real name), was married with five lovely kids. She was doing her husband's laundry one day when she discovered a packet full of condoms in one of his trouser pockets. Incensed, she went to the husband, threw the whole lot to his face and screamed 'How can you do this to me?' Having been caught in the act, the husband simply kept quiet. The discovery of the condoms only proved to Jane what she had always suspected – that the husband was highly promiscuous.

Now, within the whole condom debate, what will you tell Jane? Will you tell her just to insist on the use of condoms to protect herself from any possible infection? What do you think will happen to her psyche, looking into her husband's eyes and knowing that he has committed adultery? Will you tell her to stop 'sleeping' with her husband? How possible will that be in PNG where women are expected to be submissive to male authority and to be sexually pleasant and available at all times?

It is obvious from the above that the issue goes beyond all the suggestions. So then, what would be my response as a Catholic priest to Jane's predicament or to any other married but promiscuous person?

First, I will ask for Jane's permission to go and talk to her husband – believing that as their priest, he will not throw me out of their house and that he will at least listen to me. Then, I will methodically 'remind' him of his matrimonial commitments and the dangers of what he is doing. But, I will also be firm and

courageous to tell him that as a Christian, he is committing adultery – forbidden by the Commandments and also by their own traditional laws - that carries a lot of negative implications. (It is common in PNG village society for compensation payments being demanded from those accused of adultery and other sexual misdemeanours). Further departures from the norm will merit another approach. But, I will not argue that she should insist on condoms because I do not believe that is the issue here.

As for prostitution, every society knows and accepts the fact that it negates and violates our human sexuality and dignity. Prostitution is an aberration and is symptomatic of a disordered life style. Whatever be the reason why people go into it does not make it right.

As for the HIV positive man who ‘still’ wants sex from his wife, (let’s assume that they have children), I will let him understand the implications and the dangers to his wife. I will tell him that if he really cares for his wife and children, that he should desist from having sex in order not to infect his wife so that his wife could at least look after the family – him inclusive, but that if he goes on having sex and the wife gets infected, the whole family would be ruined. I will also try to be courageous to tell him that while sex is important, marriage is more than sex; that love is greater than sex and more so in his present condition. And, finally, I will tell him to get closer to God and that God would give him the grace to enjoy a life of no sex.

The morally good person thinks not so much about individual gains but of the good of the other person and thus the entire society at large. In the quest for personal good, an individual must ensure that no harm is done to others. This is the essence of the concept of ‘common good’. Aristotle³ in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3, Chapter 5, summarised it thus, ‘if a man, well aware of what he is doing, behaves in such a way that he is bound to become unjust, we can only say that he is voluntarily unjust’ (McKeon, 1941, p.973).

This was also brought out clearly by the PNG Department of Education when they declared that ‘every person has a moral responsibility to protect themselves and a moral and legal responsibility to protect others from HIV infection’ (Department of Education, 2005, p.3).

But what if people ignore this responsibility as many do today and are thus exposed to the risk of contracting or spreading HIV, or as some argue that people will still be promiscuous anyway, so, why not allow the use of condoms for such people? Martin Rhonheimer (2004, p.10) counters that there is no Church teaching about this because, ‘it would be nonsensical to establish moral norms for intrinsically immoral types of behaviour’. Besides, such an argument is irrelevant as it is tantamount to saying that because people will steal anyway, the law against stealing should be relaxed. So, I guess nobody can answer

³ Aristotle whose career was devoted to the study of Plato’s philosophy and devotion to science was born in 384 BC.

'what if ...' questions creditably well for the simple reason that it can degenerate into the problem of infinite regression.

I think it is important for us to add that the problem today, more especially for Catholics, is that people do not know that there are 'individual' pastoral considerations – given out on an individual basis after the priest has looked at all the circumstances surrounding a particular situation. Besides, the Church community can stand as a bulwark of support for members experiencing all kinds of problems. What people want today is a one-rule-does-it-all, website based answers. The Church is our Mother and as such is caring towards all her children.

What kind of HIV awareness campaign will the Catholic Church support?

In light of the teachings of the Church about integral human sexuality, it is important to recognize that these teachings and norms are not arbitrary divine or Church impositions to make us 'miserable and unhappy'. Today, the Church is relentlessly being demonized. Some accuse the Church of being wicked and inhumane, of not being interested in individuals, but rather to a faceless majority; of being remote and removed from people's everyday existential problems; of being abstract and worst of all of being inconsistent in her teachings. Without necessarily turning this article into an essay on Church Apologetics, it suffices to mention that the Church is not an abstract, monolithic entity out there, turned in on itself, interested only in 'catching-out' offenders, dishing out impossible 'do's' and 'don'ts' and forcing a bitter doctrine down people's throats. After all, as St Irenaeus⁴ so famously stated, the glory of God is men and women fully alive. All of us – men and women, young and old, sick and healthy, HIV/AIDS sufferers and the like, who have been redeemed through the same saving act of Jesus, ultimately belong to the Church in one way or the other. We are the Church.

Those who accuse the Church of inconsistency cite the case of some women Religious in the country who give out condoms as part of their HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. In this case, it is good for us to mention that exceptions do not make the rule. Some who go to such lengths often talk of their 'duty of care' and the primacy of conscience as the motivations for their actions. Dissent is a function of our freedom and so whoever does that knows the official teaching of the Church⁵.

Our authentic dignity and identity can only be realized when the essential order of our original nature is observed, respected and lived out. Thus, consistent with this integrated understanding of human sexuality, we assert that unless as

⁴ Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (now France) from the year 177 to 200.

⁵ In the 'Unified Towards Action Higher Education Battling HIV/AIDS in PNG' conference held at Divine Word University, Madang, Aug. 23-25 2005, it was interesting and heartening to note that all the participants were unanimous in their view that condoms will never work in PNG as a preventive device against HIV/AIDS. In that conference one remarkable intervention shocked the audience by narrating that in one household in the Western Highlands 7 out of 10 members tested positive to HIV/AIDS. The question that was put across to participants then was 'How could that be in area where the distribution of condoms has reached a very high level?'

a society we live in consonance with this authentic understanding in Papua New Guinea, we will not be addressing the major source of the spread of HIV – promiscuous sexual intercourse.

To combat the present scourge of the epidemic in PNG, it will be disastrous to emphasize anything that does not recognize, contextualise and uphold the authentic dignity and destiny of the human person, the morality of human actions and most importantly, the unavoidable consequences of our individual and collective choices. Freedom is part and parcel of our original nature and so it is a great dignity to be free, to be the origin of one's actions. However, this dignity, this freedom, carries with it enormous responsibility. Thus responsibility goes with freedom. Freedom without responsibility will lead to mayhem. Freedom is a prerequisite and of course a *sine qua non* for responsibility, because if we are denied of our freedom, then we cannot truly choose and if we cannot truly choose, then we cannot be held responsible.

In other words, to be responsible then is both a dignity and a burden. Nowhere do we meet this dilemma more than in the area of sexual freedom. Being free and responsible agents presupposes that we often try to choose what is best for us bearing in mind that we can always be called upon to account for the reasons for our actions and personal choices.

Thus again, the accusation often levelled against the Catholic Church on the issue of condoms fails to address this central element in the whole issue – responsible freedom.

Notwithstanding the plurality of opinions and perspectives on the issue of sex and accepting the fact that not many will agree with the positions of the Church, it is pertinent to note (and this is very important) that tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in PNG is not and should not be reduced to an ideological combat between pro and anti-condom use schools, but about how to efficiently and effectively prevent people from knowingly or unknowingly doing enormous damage to themselves and to the society at large through the sexual choices that they make. Thus, 'the Church is convinced that without a resurgence of moral responsibility and a reaffirmation of fundamental moral values, any program of prevention based on information alone will be ineffective and even counter productive' (Pope John Paul II, 1990, p.2).

In other words, any other solution – like the use of condoms – will not only be temporal measures, but also ineffective, and at best will only accentuate the trivialization and degrading of human sexuality that is being accepted by some as a norm today.

Examples from other countries

Apart from Thailand (and possibly Brazil) where AIDS is spread mainly among prostitutes, the promotion of the use of condoms in some African countries has not been effective in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Uganda

is a case in point. After years of trying to battle the disease through condom promotion, the government realized that the infection was increasing at an alarming rate. This prompted a government change of tactics through the ABC approach that laid more emphasis on abstinence, faithfulness and chastity rather than on the use of condoms.

According to Ugandan First Lady Janet K. Museveni (2004) the message of Abstinence and Faithfulness has been effective in Uganda for four main reasons.

First of all, it is simple and uncompromisingly strong in its intention, and it is delivered continually and with consistency.

Secondly, the alarm that was sounded by the political leadership has been taken up and magnified a thousand times by every responsible citizen.

The third reason for the effectiveness of the message of Abstinence and Faithfulness is that it was based on the traditional and cultural beliefs and moral framework of the people of Uganda. ... Traditionally, in Uganda, sexual purity was required. ... Happily, sexual purity and faithfulness to one's marriage partner were also emphasized by the Christian tradition when it was introduced in Uganda, a century ago. Even the people of the Muslim faith attach great importance to strict moral conduct among the young.

The fourth reason why the message of Abstinence and Faithfulness has been effective in Uganda is that people have been confronted with the horror of death, first hand and at close quarters. There is no person, young and old, in Uganda, who has not witnessed a loved one, a family member, or a neighbor, suffer horribly and die prematurely because of AIDS. In such a situation, facts tend to speak for themselves. The sight of fallen comrades is a strong deterrent, and a clear sign that a change in behavior is called for.⁶

The same is true of Botswana, where 350,000 of the country's 1.8 million are HIV positive. The Post Courier Newspaper (Tuesday, July 26, 2005, p.14) reported the president of Botswana, Festus G. Mogae in a conference as saying,

The rather more important message I am bringing to this conference is that, after an admittedly late start in recent years, my country has been dealing proactively with the AIDS challenge. ... This has called for significant behavioural change within our society as well as the introduction of proactive programs of prevention and treatment on the part of the government and others.

⁶ From an address delivered at a conference, Common Ground: A Shared Vision for Health', hosted by the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, Washington, DC, June 17-19, 2004.

Thus, the emphasis here is on behaviour change as a matter of government policy.

Conclusion

The issue of HIV/AIDS in PNG today, because of other attenuating factors, is a serious matter. It is a battle between life and death, and at least, in a non-nuclear combat situation, the only way of avoiding being hit is not to go near the combat zone. In this case, it seems that the best way of being free is not to be reckless sexually. As many Papua New Guineans believe that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a curse (from whoever or whatever), perhaps one option is to strengthen this 'home-grown' ideology instead of introducing a completely foreign concept like the use of condoms into their world view. Sociologically, we know that the best change, the one that will last, is the one that comes from within. Authentic change rarely comes from outside. Therefore, it stands to reason that in this fight, only behaviour change from within, stemming from people's world view, what they already know, will be effective. Besides, in the face of this monster, is it worth it to be reckless? Is it worth it to entrust one's life to a piece of latex (condom)?

The Church supports HIV awareness programs that are based on the communication of an authentic value-centred understanding of the meaning of the human person. Such a broad moral vision should perfectly and clearly show that abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage are the only morally correct ways to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS infection in Papua New Guinea.

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