

30 July 2001  
St Peters' Seminary, Pretoria

**A MESSAGE OF HOPE**  
**from the Catholic Bishops to the People of God**  
**in South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland.**

We the people of Southern Africa find ourselves in the middle of a great crisis in our nations caused by HIV/AIDS. Many people despair when they are stricken with HIV/AIDS because they feel rejected and sometimes are rejected by their families and communities. Some even commit suicide.

In this desperate situation we, the Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa, bring a message of hope to all who are living with this killer disease: Do not despair -- you are not abandoned by Christ nor by us.

When you find yourself in a hopeless situation on account of AIDS, Jesus, your brother, remains right next to you and never abandons you. We encourage your families and communities to accept you with love and to stand by you. We urge them not to abandon you but to continue Christ's mission of mercy, compassion and love. The Church loves you, welcomes you and reaches out to you in many ways.

We have a message for our nations, the youth and married couples.

**1. MESSAGE FOR OUR NATIONS**

Many people and especially governments promote condoms for preventing AIDS. This is a matter of deep concern for us in the Church.

The bishops regard the widespread and indiscriminate promotion of condoms as an immoral and misguided weapon in our battle against HIV/AIDS for the following reasons.

- \* The use of condoms goes against human dignity.
- \* Condoms change the beautiful act of love into a selfish search for pleasure -- while rejecting responsibility.
- \* Condoms do not guarantee protection against HIV/AIDS.
- \* Condoms may even be one of the main reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Apart from the possibility of condoms being faulty or wrongly used they contribute to the breaking down of self-control and mutual respect.

The promotion and distribution of condoms as a means of having so-called "safe sex" contributes to the breaking down of the moral fiber of our nations because it gives a wrong message to people. What it really says is this:

\* "It is alright to sleep around as you like even if you are still young -- as long as you do not contract HIV/Aids."

\* "There is no need for training yourself in self-control."

\* "There is no need to prepare yourself to be faithful to a future spouse."

\* "It is all right to use another person for selfish pleasure."

What undermines the morals of our countries?

\* It is lack of self-control and lack of respect for others.

\* It is unfaithfulness and irresponsible sexual behavior.

\* It is loose living, which destroys human dignity -- UBUNTU – and self-respect.

This is our conviction as Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa. We proclaim our message loud and clear, a message which will strengthen again the moral fiber of our countries:

"Abstain and be faithful" is the human and Christian way of overcoming HIV/AIDS.

Abstain from sex before marriage and be faithful to your spouse in marriage -- this is the answer, which Christ gives us. With his help we will overcome AIDS and build up a new, happy and healthy South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland.

## **2. MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH**

Dear young people, we are well aware that you are searching for real love, happiness and meaning in your lives. God says, "I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). Make sure you choose life by accepting God's way.

Do not allow yourselves to be misguided by people who show you the wrong way by offering you condoms. Abstain from sex before marriage and be faithful to your spouse in your future marriage -- this is the way Christ shows us.

We often hear people saying, "Condoms save lives and therefore they should be promoted." Our answer is, "If we follow Christ's way, we shall save far more lives and encourage people to grow in self-control and responsibility for others."

Dear young people, you should not say: "It is impossible to abstain." You must prove to yourselves that abstinence is possible and that lust is not love. There are many groups of young people who help one another in their struggle to live chaste lives. There are groups such as "Youth Alive" which promote "Education for Life" through workshops and programs inspired by the mottoes "True Love Waits" and "Choose Life."

Yes, it is difficult to abstain, but it is not impossible with God's help, which we obtain through prayer. Do not listen to people who say, "You will go mad if you do not have sex!" In fact, you will be very healthy in mind and body.

To young people who are living with AIDS:

We encourage you to speak up openly and help your companions to avoid the disease. In this way you will truly become promoters of life. You are continuing the mission of Christ who said, "I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

We call on young men:

Respect girls and young women and relate to them without making sexual demands of them.

St. Paul says, "God wills you all to be holy. He wants you to keep away from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3)

### **3. MESSAGE TO MARRIED COUPLES**

We make a strong appeal to all married couples,

Husbands and wives, remain faithful to each other as you promised on your wedding day. In this way you proclaim God's faithful love for us.

In your difficulties, our God who is faithful will never abandon you. Keep in contact with God through prayer and listening to his word. We encourage you to support one another in your struggle of life.

There are couples where one of the parties is living with HIV/AIDS. In these cases there is the real danger that the healthy partner may contract this killer disease. The Church accepts that everyone has the right to defend one's life against mortal danger. This would include using the appropriate means and course of action.

Similarly where one spouse is infected with HIV/AIDS they must listen to their consciences. They are the only ones who can choose the appropriate means, in order to defend themselves against the infection. Decisions of such an intimate nature should be made by both husband and wife as equal and loving partners.

### **CALL TO CONVERSION**

We proclaim Christ's message to you, the people of today, "The Kingdom of God is near. Turn away from your sin and believe in the Good News" (Mark 1:15).

So often we blame God or other people for what happens to us. Instead we have to take responsibility for our actions before God. This involves listening to God's word and to the teaching of the Church so that we can have informed and mature consciences.

The message of the Gospel is very different from that which we receive from television, videos, Internet, newspapers and magazines, which so often promote uncontrolled sex and infidelity.

Dear People of God. We have to solve our problems in this "Kingdom Way." Therefore let us heed the call of Christ to return to the way of self-control and fidelity. St. Paul encourages us to shine among corrupt people like stars lighting up the sky as we offer them the message of life (see Philippians 2:15-16).

### **CALL TO ACTION**

We call on all people of our nations to break the silence around HIV/AIDS by calling AIDS -- AIDS and by accepting people who are living with this disease.

We express our deep appreciation to all who are working generously (and very often with little remuneration) for people living with AIDS and for AIDS orphans.

We also pay tribute to the priests, religious sisters and brothers, and to men and women of the community who so often work quietly and generously to bring Christ's healing ministry to the most neglected and forgotten.

As bishops we are proud of the enormous outreach in every diocese in AIDS prevention, caring for those living with AIDS and those affected by AIDS, especially children and orphans.

We call on small Christian communities, prayer-groups, sodalities, priests, religious and pastoral workers, to join hands with all people who are engaged in the struggle against AIDS.

We wish also to encourage others to volunteer their time to visit and care for those who are afflicted by this disease.

AIDS must never be considered as a punishment from God. He wants us to be healthy and not to die from AIDS. It is for us a sign of the times challenging all people to inner transformation and to the following of Christ in his ministry of healing, mercy and love.

### **CALL TO PRAYER**

We invite all people to unite in prayer to Almighty God in this time of crisis in our nations. In the past in South Africa we approached God to help us in our struggle for freedom and human dignity and we experienced the great miracle of transition. Now we pray for another "miracle" to bring us that inner freedom which will enable our nations to choose the right way to uphold human dignity in our new struggle -- the battle against HIV/AIDS. Jesus is with us still today on our way of the cross of HIV/AIDS.

Jesus invites us in his hour of agony to join him in deep prayer to the Father as the way to resurrection and life.

May the Lord guide us all, give us strength and touch us with his healing hand.

We greet you with affectionate love and bless you, in the name of the + Father, the + Son and the + Holy Spirit.

The Catholic bishops who are assembled at the Plenary Session of the Southern African Bishops Conference at St. Peter's Seminary, Pretoria, July 30, 2001.