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Holistic Outlook Called for in AIDS Struggle

Vatican Official Advocates "Treatment at All Levels"

ROME, JUNE 8, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- With the 30th anniversary of the discovery of AIDS being marked this week, a Rome conference on the disease concluded with several appeals. Among them: more solidarity from rich countries, responsible use of sexuality, and greater closeness to AIDS victims stigmatized by society.

Experts, doctors and Church representatives met May 27-28 to discuss AIDS and its cure, care and prevention. The conference was timely, as it was June 5, 1981 -- 30 years ago Sunday -- that Los Angeles first reported an unusual form of pneumonia that turned out to be AIDS.

Since then, 25 million people have died from the disease and another 34 million are infected. Happily however, the number of people killed by AIDS is going down.

The Church, meanwhile, continues to be a global leader in the battle against AIDS. Its 117,000 health organizations range from meager centers in jungles to ultramodern polyclinics in large cities.

The AIDS phenomenon is certainly about more than just numbers, Benedict XVI's secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, said at the conference.

"It would be ridiculous to limit ourselves to consider the 'numerical' aspects -- though they are important -- in the work of care," he said. "An essential part of the contribution offered by the Church in this struggle is, in fact, on the plane of the construction of that 'invisible capital,' without which the struggle would be deprived of lasting efficacy and of the best networks of health care."

Cardinal Bertone was referring to the importance of education imparted by the Church, to overcome prejudices and treat those infected by the virus "as persons gifted with an inalienable dignity."

Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, said that stopping the sexual transmission of the virus is "a total and global struggle," but warned against supporting measures that insist on sexual responsibility.

The archbishop welcomed advances in early antiretroviral treatment of AIDS, especially as the advances have brought a glimmer of hope to spouses of those infected with HIV.

Good Samaritan

Stefano Vella, research director for the Istituto Superiore di Sanità, also advocated a holistic perspective.

"The future lies in the integration of treatments," he said. "It is necessary to think of health in global terms. At the base must be the will to combat the inequality of the treatments."

Michel Sidibe, executive director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), stated that there are "10 million people waiting for treatment, and their lives hang on a thread." He added that it "isn't the moment for self-complacency."

The director spoke of an "improvement in social practices and the role of values and of the family," saying that youth are responsible for this change, as they "negotiate their sexuality in a responsible way."

Regarding the use of condoms in AIDS prevention, Sidibe told conference participants that he welcomed Benedict XVI's comments in his recent book-length interview, "Light of the World." The Pope had said that the use of a condom by a male prostitute to prevent his partner's infection could be a first step toward moral responsibility.

"This is very important," he said. "This has helped me to understand his position better and has opened up a new space for dialogue."

Although a clarification by the Vatican stated that Church teaching on condoms hasn't been changed, many who promote the use of condoms continue to view the Pontiff's comments as favorable. Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's permanent representative to the U.N. offices in Geneva, countered in a later address, "We cannot solve the problem (of AIDS) by distributing condoms."

Cardinal Bertone recalled Blessed John Paul II's wish for the 1999 conference on "The Catholic Church and the Challenge of HIV/AIDS."

In that message, John Paul II encouraged "everybody to work together, beginning with the resources of their own skills and responsibilities, in taking care of those who suffer from this disease, employing the resources of science to alleviate their suffering."

"These people are accompanied by the solidarity of the Church," the Polish Pope affirmed, "and the fraternal generosity of very many men and women of good will who are moved by the example of the Good Samaritan to come to the help, with suitable instruments, of these sick people, being responsible for them until their complete cure or a serene death."

[Reporting by Mariaelena Finessi]

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