

## CATHOLIC RESPONSES TO AIDS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: 30 YEARS AFTER THE DISCOVERY OF AIDS

Johan Viljoen

21 January 2013

St Joseph's Theological Institute, in collaboration with the SACBC AIDS Office, is hosting a conference titled "Catholic Responses to AIDS in Southern Africa, 30 years after the discovery of HIV", at St Joseph's, Cedara, over the period 20 – 22 January 2013.

A previous theological conference of the Catholic Church about AIDS, titled "Responsibility in an Age of AIDS" was held at St Augustine University, Johannesburg, in 2003. At that time, South Africa already was the country with the largest number of people living with AIDS globally. The President of the country was on record as being an AIDS denialist, believing that HIV did not exist. His Minister of Health towed the party line, resisting all attempts to introduce PMTCT or anti-retroviral treatment in the public health sector, promoting the use of garlic, beetroot, olive oil and lemons as the best way of combating the disease. Treatment was available in the private health sector, at costs prohibitive to all except the wealthiest members of society. The 2003 conference emphasised the need for advocacy, for the Church to get involved in the provision of treatment, and for the Church to promote responsible behaviour to prevent the spread of the disease.

During the intervening years, the Church responded vigorously to the challenges. More than 40 000 people were initiated on antiretroviral drugs in the Church's treatment program. Over 30 000 orphans received comprehensive care and support. The Church's network of more than 70 home based care organizations provided care and dignity to terminal patients. The Church became the country's largest provider of in-patient hospice care.

The current conference takes place in a radically changed environment. On the positive side, the South African government has risen to the challenges. PMTCT is now available to pregnant women at every public sector ante-natal facility. Antiretroviral drugs are available free of charge in every health district, and are being accessed by almost 2 million people. Life expectancy has increased, from 54 ten years ago, to 63.

On the negative side, these successes have led to complacency. Donors are withdrawing support to the Church (and all NGO's), believing that the crisis is over and that the government is in control of the situation. This despite the fact that new infections continue unabated. Orphans, over 2 million of them, with their desperate needs, will remain with us for years to come.

The conference's opening address was given by Dr Michael Czerny SJ – founder of the African Jesuit AIDS Network. He described the response of the Catholic Church globally. He was followed by Dr Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator SJ – the Provincial

Superior of the Society of Jesus for Eastern Africa. He described the response of the Catholic Church in Africa. On the second day the focus narrowed further – Sr Alison Munro gave a comprehensive overview of the Church's response since 2000 in Southern Africa. Cardinal Wilfred Napier OFM described the Church's response in an urban Diocese (Durban). Bishop Kevin Dowling described the Church's response in a rural Diocese (Rustenburg).

There are several overarching themes, touched upon by all speakers:

- Globally, continentally and locally, the Church's response is characterised by compassionate care and support to those affected by AIDS – particularly in the areas of home based care and orphan care. In many parts of the world, and Africa, the Church is the largest provider of care. Its responses have involved large numbers of lay people, especially women. Most see this as a way of responding to Jesus's exhortation to care for the sick, the poor and the most marginalised members of society.
- The Church's response to AIDS has been largely driven by female religious. The leading role of sisters cannot be over-emphasised.
- While the Church is a global leader in the provision of care, its response in the area of prevention has been less effective.
- Since the inception of government's ARV roll-out, AIDS is increasingly seen as being the responsibility of the state. This has been accompanied by the simultaneous decrease in levels of funding to NGO's (of which the Church is one). However, the Church was present in the world for almost two millennia before the advent of AIDS, and it will continue to be present in the future. Regarding AIDS, it still has a vital role. But it will have to re-define its role going forward. Firstly, it will focus more on responding to the spiritual and pastoral needs of those affected by AIDS. Bishop Dowling spoke of the "gift of presence" that the Church has to offer. Secondly, even if all new infections and deaths from AIDS cease immediately, orphans will still be with us for at least two more decades. The Church has a particular role to play in addressing their needs.