

Statement of the Austrian Bishops regarding the HIV pandemic

HIV and AIDS – a concern of our Church

The Church accompanies people living with and affected by HIV as it always has given service to those affected by illness and other human challenges since it was first established by Our Lord Jesus Christ. There is also a need for thorough education about HIV and AIDS, to prevent the expansion of the disease and get rid of the stigmatization and discrimination against people living with HIV. The Church gives priority attention to poor and marginalized people – not only those who are materially poor. Relief organisations, pastoral care and counselling services constitute the worldwide work of the Church.

Important coherences

AIDS - a poverty related disease

Between HIV and AIDS and the development of a country are a large number of interconnections. Those who suffer from poverty become poorer because of HIV and AIDS. Misery, oppression and shattered family life are the breeding ground for the rapid spreading of HIV and AIDS. In addition, other factors like the discrimination of women and the shortage of health care also favour the expansion of the pandemic. Where anti-retroviral medications are accessible (often more readily affordable and available in high income countries), people living with HIV often are able to avoid the onset of life-threatening illnesses linked to AIDS and thus can live positive lives and avoid an early death. Sufficient anti-retroviral medical treatment is in many developing countries lacking. Among the human beings all over the world that suffer from HIV and AIDS, almost half of them are female. The number of HIV and AIDS infected women is increasing in all regions. Women often are deprived of adequate information about HIV and often are subjected to unjust treatment and oppression that puts them at special risk of HIV infection.

Poverty, education and prevention

In the intervention against AIDS in favour of the sick people, the environment plays a very important role. Insufficient education and lack of motivation for changing behaviours, which can be very risky for the spread of the virus, are reasons for the lack of significant success in preventing the further spread of HIV.

Sorrow and guilt

Every fatal disease, every deathbed, every orphan is associated with sorrow (suffering) and pain. As Christians we are requested to help the people with HIV and AIDS. We will never condemn anybody because of HIV and AIDS. Our task is to help. But we also have to make clear that some specific behaviour can lead to AIDS. AIDS is often linked to stigmatization and exclusion, we will resolutely oppose this. The people concerned suffer from the exclusion in the same way as they suffer from physical symptoms of the disease.

Therapy and recovery

AIDS can't be cured but can be treated

In most cases the virus and the infection can be well controlled with the help of the antiretroviral combination therapy. But more than halve of the people living with HIV in developing countries still are deprived of access to these medicines. The Churches play an important role in providing hospital care, therapy centers, drugstores for the Poor as well as other medical services and care facilities. Beside the medical aspect, the word "care" has an extended meaning of psychosocial, cultural and spiritual point of view.

It's not only a question of medical care alone

There are many good reasons for that we should not count on medical care alone. HIV is a problem that not only has an effect on one single person because of his infection, and the potential for his

development of AIDS-related, life-threatening illnesses, deterioration of health status and eventual death. It is also a phenomenon that upset drastically the whole family life: patients may need care for years, parents are buried and finally the dependant orphans are to be taken care of.

Solidarity is needed

For as the body is a one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ (1Kor 12, 12). This meaningful (significant) picture expresses the solidarity which we feel with all those who suffer. This solidarity will be combined with alert attention for the severe threat to which people are exposed.

Christian morality aims at respecting and having a positive outlook on life. Scientific findings and all possibilities of modern medicine must be used to save lives. This life receives its value and its dignity because it is a sacred gift from our Creator who creates each human being and invites each of us to fulfil our life. Therefore abstinence outside of marriage and faithfulness in marriage are not only the best way to avoid an HIV infection but also are the best way for lifelong happiness and fulfilment since they respect and preserve the dignity given by the Creator to each and every child that He has created in His image.

The worldwide spreading of HIV and AIDS needs intensive action:

Therefore we request:

- Compliance of the promise for development aid;
- 10% of the HIV and AIDS financial funds for protection, care and training of AIDS orphans;
- The development of appropriate HIV-tests, in particular for children;
- The development and access to antiretroviral medicine for all;
- The multiplication of measures to prevent the HIV transmission from mother to child;
- Adaption of intellectual property rights related to patents on medicine to treat people living with HIV in developing countries, especially children living with the disease;
- A comprehensive approach in health services, prevention, in strengthening the role of women and in poverty alleviation (reduction).

In solidarity we commit ourselves to:

- To advocate that the health, social and educational services of the Church will conform to the needs of those who are infected with AIDS;
- To work together with other Christian denominations and other religions that have services in their own communities against HIV and AIDS;
- To favour change of mentality, attitude and behaviour which are necessary in the intervention with the challenges of the pandemic;
- To work tirelessly to eradicate stigmatization and discrimination, and overcome all those social, religious, cultural and political norms and practices that strengthen such stigmas and discrimination;
- To welcome those who suffer from HIV and AIDS in our church in a sincere (cordial) way, without prejudice and in compassionate manner, and assure them that they have “a place at the table of the Lord”. Gladly we administer the sacraments in an appropriate way when required.

Finally we would like to express our hope that even in this difficult times the human intellect with the help of God will find out ways to overcome the devastating impact of this disease. In cooperation with all the people living with or affected by HIV and with the responsible institutions we hope and pray to God that moral, physical and spiritual sufferings that originate from this pandemic may be eased.

Vienna, July 2010