

A STATEMENT OF THE ANTILLES EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE ON HIV-AIDS

“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” (Gaudium et Spes 1)

As we conclude our 49th Annual Plenary Meeting, we the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, express our pastoral care and concern for all the peoples of our Region. As a Region we have many reasons for hope. We are also faced with many challenges. Among these challenges is the scourge of HIV-AIDS. On a global scale, we in the Caribbean have the 2nd highest incidence *per capita* of HIV-AIDS after Sub-Sahara Africa. As we know HIV-AIDS has no cure as yet. The most effective means of protection from this disease is sexual abstinence before marriage and fidelity to one spouse after marriage. This is factually attested to in countries such as Uganda where abstinence is an integral part of the governmental strategy to confront this disease.

It is not only unfortunate, but also unacceptable that victims of HIV-AIDS should suffer stigma and discrimination. We must challenge the negative attitudes that are widely held among our people. We declare without reservation that HIV-AIDS is not a curse from God. It is not a divine judgment on individuals for their sins.

We are happy to note the tremendous response of the Roman Catholic Church in the Region to the HIV-AIDS pandemic. We as Bishops are committed to seeking new ways to enter into partnership with other Christian churches, other religions, Governments, Health Care providers, and the private sector in providing even more service to HIV-AIDS victims and their families. In particular, we need to educate ourselves, and the people of our Region to the nature of the disease with a view of reducing the discrimination and the stigma associated with it.

It is not possible to contract HIV-AIDS by merely talking to, touching or even hugging an HIV-AIDS victim. Those with HIV-AIDS deserve our understanding, our respect, our assistance and our care. We reaffirm the dignity of every man, woman and child afflicted with HIV-AIDS and reach out to him, conscious that God “*comforts us in our afflictions and thus enables us to comfort those who are in trouble*” (2 Corinthians 1:33ff).

All who dare to be followers of Christ must remember that much of His public life was taken up with healing the sick. This included even those whose diseases placed them beyond the margins of society. We need to mirror and reflect the unconditional love of Christ for every person irrespective of his or her lifestyle and its consequences. Christ taught us that whatever we do to the least among us that we do unto Him (cf. Matthew 25:40). We encourage family members and our faith communities to welcome and care for those afflicted with HIV-AIDS.

We turn to the Youth in a special way. Recalling that His Holiness Pope John Paul II had a very special love for the Young of the World, we encourage all the Youth Abstinence

Clubs being formed in our Region and we say to them and indeed to all: “*Be not afraid!*” The future is in the hands of the Youth who, with the help of Christ, are indeed capable of embracing the principles of the Gospel and of proclaiming the Hope which is in us (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

We encourage the pursuit of every effort in the pastoral and medical field to bring healing compassion to our sisters and brothers in need. We proclaim that “*the charity of Christ impels us all*” (2 Corinthians 5:14) to bring an end to the stigma attached to all those who suffer from this disease.

Given at Paramaribo, Suriname

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