

# HIV/AIDS – Are Catholic Students Ready to Accept the Challenge to Educate Each Other about this Pandemic?

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While I am far from a youth myself, I am grateful for the enthusiasm and the vision brought by young people as they work in partnership with those blessed with longer years of life experience to confront the world's most urgent problems. One such global emergency can be found in the pandemic of HIV and AIDS, in the face of which young people require knowledge, information, and skills to change behaviour as their first line of defence.

Young people correctly can be located at the center of the pandemic in terms of transmission, vulnerability, impact, and potential for change. Throughout the world, more than half of the new HIV infections occur in young people less than 25 years of age. Every day, between 5,000 and 6,000 young people between 15 and 24 years of age become infected with HIV. Thus almost one-fourth of those living with HIV are young people. In its Global Update on the AIDS Pandemic, released in December 2004, UNAIDS estimated that, in the worst-affected countries of eastern and southern Africa, if current infection rates continue and if no large-scale treatment programme is effectively initiated, up to 60% of today's 15-year-olds will not reach their 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is most important to point out here the particular vulnerability of girls and young women to infection with this virus. In many places of the world, but most especially in the low-income countries, they are targeted for forced sexual activity by older men and thus have little ability to preserve their health, social and emotional wellbeing.

## **What Do Youth Have to Say About HIV and AIDS?**

Too often, adults think that they can and should solve problems confronted by youth without ever consulting them about their views and experiences. In 2002, the National Catholic AIDS Network of the United States decided to directly ask young people about their fears and concerns, their worries and confusion regarding HIV and AIDS. They told us about their need more practical information about the pandemic, including ways of transmission and the role of HIV in causing AIDS. They also asked for help in building skills and capacity to avoid sexual activity before marriage. Young people pointed out that it is not sufficient to communicate the facts about HIV; they insisted that values as human dignity, self-esteem, and self-worth need to be integrated into family life education and HIV prevention classes..

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## **The Church – Mater et Magistra – Special Outreach to Youth in a Time of AIDS**

Pope John Paul II told young people during his visit to Uganda in February 1993:

*Do not let yourselves be led astray by those who ridicule your chastity or your power to control yourselves. The strength of your future married love depends on the strength of your present effort to learn about true love. Chastity is the only safe and virtuous means to put an end to the tragic plague of AIDS.*

Archbishop Bernard Moras, of Bangalore, India, recognised the ability of young people to educate each other in the field of HIV and AIDS education:

*Peer education is cited as one of the most important approaches to youth programmes in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. It will be a great help to introduce Life Skill Education in schools, which comprises of directive, thoughtful curricula, accurately interpreted medical data and ethical reasoning. This would help to guide students towards right decisions involving respect, responsibility in one's behavioural pattern.*

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## **Moving from Words to Actions: Effective Models of Church- and Value-based HIV Prevention Education for Young People**

*The Catholic Church has moved far beyond words in efforts to build capacity among young people to prevent the further transmission of HIV. Effective models of HIV prevention education have been developed within Church-based programmes in all parts of the world, including: -The Education for Life programme, initiated in Uganda, and expanded to many parts of Africa; -"Free to be" abstinence education programme, which is sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Santa Rosa, California USA; -Jesuit AIDS Project, Zimbabwe.*

## **Let Us Continue the Good Work that the Lord Has Begun in Us:**

As we acknowledge the excellent capacity of young people to educate each other about HIV and AIDS, let us not ignore the growing dimensions of this pandemic as well as the special vulnerability of young people to become infected with HIV. Finally, let us be motivated by the compelling admonition of the Pope John Paul II:

***It is said that millions of persons are now afflicted by this scourge, many of whom were infected from birth. Humanity cannot close its eyes.***