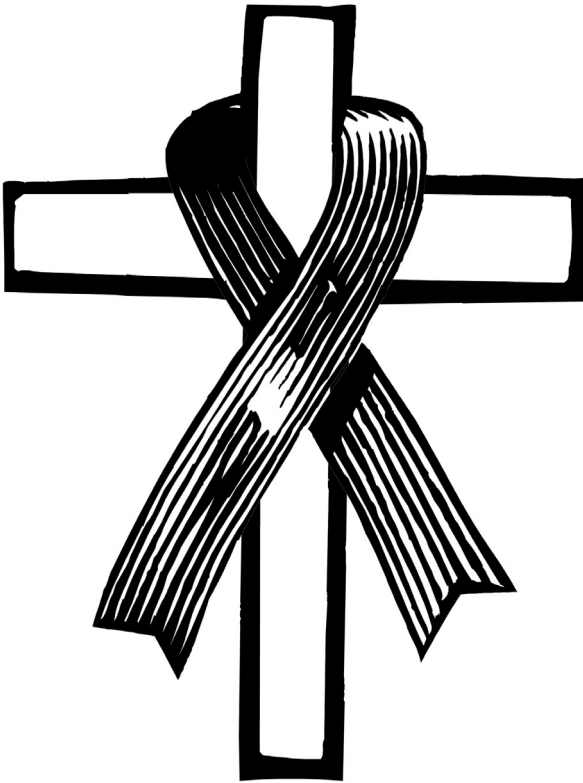


A PASTORAL LETTER

The Fullness of Life

BY THEODORE CARDINAL McCARRICK
ARCHBISHOP OF WASHINGTON



A P A S T O R A L L E T T E R

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In Saint John's Gospel, the Lord speaks of the purpose of His coming. He tells us that He has come so that we might have life to the full (*Jn 10, 10*). I would like to reflect on that with you in the context of the terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS that is affecting our community, our nation and our world, and to talk about our call to solidarity with those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

1. It is with deep sadness and sorrow that we see how HIV/AIDS has affected families in our local Church. Men and women of all ages and backgrounds have succumbed to this deadly scourge in the face of incredible stigma and enormous suffering over the past 20 years. We recognize the pain and loss of thousands of grieving families and friends. To them and to all who suffer with HIV/AIDS, we offer our support and love.

2. HIV infection rates still remain high in our community. In 2001, the rate of AIDS cases reported in the District of Columbia was more than ten times the national rate on a per capita basis.¹ Even in our suburban neighborhoods AIDS cases remain numerous. In 2001, Maryland ranked second among all states in the rate of reported AIDS cases; it ranked ninth in the nation in terms of cumulative AIDS cases.² Prince George's County has the second largest number of AIDS cases in the state.³ I mention these statistics only to show the depth of pain and suffering experienced in our community and to summon

and strengthen our response as neighbors and believers and friends.

3. The truth is that throughout our nation and in most developed nations, HIV/AIDS has caused, and continues to cause, so much pain, suffering and death. Today, new drug therapies allow more and more people with the virus to live longer, more productive lives -- a great blessing not only to those who are infected, but also to our society as a whole. Yet, this should not give the impression that the devastation of AIDS is over. People are continuing to infect and re-infect themselves and others with increasingly resistant virus strains that are beginning to outpace current medicine and research. Some people even argue that the AIDS death rate may climb again to earlier levels and even increase beyond our past experience. Many medical experts believe that a vaccine is still 15 to 50 years away. Even then, it will not cure the millions of people who have or will have the virus and/or disease, nor will it necessarily stop all new transmissions.

4. But it is in some underdeveloped nations, especially in Africa and in parts of Asia, that HIV/AIDS has reached apocalyptic proportions. Nearly 30 million people are living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, including almost three million children under the age of 15. In some nations, such as Zimbabwe and Botswana, at least one in three adults has HIV/AIDS.⁴ These shocking statistics cannot convey the true magnitude of this catastrophe. Much more than a health problem, HIV/AIDS is wreaking social, economic and political devastation. Millions of families have lost one or both parents, leaving behind orphaned and homeless children. Doctors and nurses have died, while schools have lost teachers and students to the disease. Military and security forces have decreased in size and

strength, which has threatened the political stability of some nations as they teeter on the brink of civil war. Societies are slowly crumbling into communities of orphans and elders who live with poverty and disease.

5. While all of this may seem overwhelming, we cannot throw up our hands in despair. We have hope and trust in the promise made by our Lord that He came so that we might have life in its fullness. This does not simply mean earthly life, but also eternal life in communion with God, as well. Our Catholic Church holds out this promise of the fullness of life in Jesus Christ to all people, including those with HIV/AIDS.

6. Those among us who are living with HIV/AIDS must not feel that they are alone and abandoned. We, who are their brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church, must walk in solidarity with them on their journey. As our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has said, “Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people. On the contrary, it is a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are really responsible for all.”⁵ Echoing the Holy Father’s words, we make this call for a *culture of solidarity* with people who are living with HIV/AIDS and with their families.

7. We must manifest this solidarity through love. Our Lord shows us so often and in so many ways how to love one another. One of the finest examples of this love and solidarity is the story of the Good Samaritan. How many countless people living with HIV/AIDS are still suffering and abandoned by society? We must always imitate the self-giving and sacrifice of the Divine Good Samaritan who loved us and still continues to love us into new life.

8. This love means that we need not be drawn into futile debates about concentrating on treatment versus prevention. We must do both. To emphasize one at the exclusion of the other is self-defeating, like building with one hand while destroying with the other. We must be compassionate and responsible in addressing HIV/AIDS, as the title of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ 1989 pastoral statement, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis*, reminds us.

9. It was out of compassion that the Catholic Church stepped forward early in the AIDS crisis with a commitment and resources to love and serve people living with HIV/AIDS and their families. Our commitment has not wavered, but in fact has strengthened as Catholic organizations continue to provide direct and discreet service. In our local Church, the Archdiocese, parishes and Catholic medical centers provide pastoral and medical outreach. Worldwide, the Catholic Church provides approximately 25 percent of all AIDS care⁶ through its ministries and many of its more than 110,000 health-care organizations.⁷ That care is given with compassion, love and courage not only in our community, but in distant and often isolated nations. For example, Catholic Relief Services currently has programs to serve people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in 30 countries, primarily in Africa, but also in the hardest hit areas of Asia and Latin America.⁸

10. Yet, it is not enough only to provide care for those living with HIV/AIDS. Compassion also calls us to address the crisis of values that so often leads to the spread of HIV/AIDS. As St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, “The great kindness one can render to any man consists in leading him to truth.”⁹

11. While many policies aim to prevent HIV/AIDS by advocating “safe sex” or “safer sex” through condom use and/or condom distribution, the Catholic Church recognizes these are not solutions, but myths. Condoms too often fail in preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, or the incurable Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) that increases one’s susceptibility to HIV infection, while giving their users a false sense of security. Further, the use of condoms contradicts our faith’s understanding of sexual union as an expression of spousal love through a mutual and total gift of self.

12. It is because our Church has a total vision of human dignity, which begets a deep love for all people and a respect for their well being in all dimensions -- physical, psychological, moral and spiritual -- that it rejects the false promises of condoms. Instead, we encourage people to embrace chastity, fidelity and sexual abstinence outside of marriage, behaviors that protect the physical and spiritual integrity, preserve their true dignity and promote true responsibility.

13. Our critics often claim that chastity and sexual abstinence programs cannot work alone or at all. They claim that people cannot change their behavior, while at the same time they call for exactly that -- for people to use condoms consistently and correctly every time they engage in sexual activity. If society is going to seek to modify conduct, then would it not be better and more effective to encourage behaviors such as chastity and abstinence that eliminate the risk of disease while promoting human dignity and a healthy life in all dimensions, rather than behaviors that do not eradicate the risk of disease and lull people into a false sense of security?

14. The Church’s teaching on HIV/AIDS prevention is arguably a sign of contradiction in the world today. Yet our Lord promises us “by your perseverance, you will secure your lives.” (*Luke 21:19*) Our moral and social teachings are part of the Good News through which God leads us to the fullness of life.

15. Our Holy Father states that “the battle against AIDS ought to be everyone’s battle.”¹⁰ We who profess faith in the Risen Christ must take on this challenge of responding to one of the more horrible and intractable human catastrophes of modern times with authentic values, true compassion and greater responsibility.

16. St. Paul’s words to the Romans apply to our own local Church, “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” (*Romans 12:2*) All of us are called not to conform to the world’s view of sexuality and HIV/AIDS, but to be transformed by God’s truth so that we might transform the world.

17. In this Easter season, as our local Church marks a new year in the history of our salvation, let us also mark a new beginning in our response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS. I ask our clergy, theologians, catechists, teachers, lay leaders and lay ministers to proclaim the Church’s teaching in their respective roles and vocations. None of us should present this teaching as a burden, but as the gift that it truly is. All of us should be convinced and convincing in this matter. Our lives, our work and our witness must testify to the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

18. In our own local Church of Washington, let us commit ourselves to providing a more loving and

compassionate response to the reality of HIV/AIDS, not only by caring for those infected and affected by the disease, but also by promoting the truth about human sexuality.

19. We need to promote the availability of early testing and intervention to stop further infection and death. We do this from a moral and medical perspective that places a premium on values that truly respect the life and dignity of the person. We urge people at risk to be tested, to receive their test results and to receive counseling and assistance regardless of their diagnosis. Those who receive a positive diagnosis should get the necessary support and solidarity to live with the virus and/or disease, and to prevent placing others at risk of infection. Those with a negative diagnosis must be helped to appreciate and accept new behaviors that truly protect their lives by preserving true dignity, protecting physical and spiritual integrity and promoting true responsibility.

20. We recognize that our solidarity with our brothers and sisters throughout the world has a special significance in this local Church, here in the home of our nation's capital. Therefore, part of our response is to call upon our civic leaders to continue to address this crisis at national and international levels. The recent initiative of the United States government, in so far as it reflects our values, is a welcome step to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Africa, where the pandemic of HIV/AIDS has taken such a terrible toll. This important new commitment needs to be sustained over time and with adequate resources.

21. Even beyond the context of HIV/AIDS, we affirm the right to healthcare for every person. We recognize that many nations lack basic medicines to fight many diseases, much less the more costly drugs to combat HIV infection and, therefore, we call upon our government and other

governments to help ensure that the appropriate medicine is accessible, affordable and available to all. We stand in solidarity with the Holy See as it calls for pharmaceutical companies to work together to overcome the burdens of costly research and development so these urgently needed drugs may be available at affordable prices¹¹ and to urge nations to build stronger healthcare infrastructures, to provide emergency relief assistance and to work to eliminate poverty and other factors¹² that contribute to HIV infection. Agencies that work on HIV/AIDS care and prevention have noted these factors may include sexual violence and exploitation of women, stigma, silence and fear about the disease, deterioration of the family unit, war, starvation and malnutrition, international debt and unjust political, social and economic structures.

22. Above all, we entrust these efforts to our Heavenly Father so that our service to our brothers and sisters living with HIV/AIDS might be a witness to the life and love of Jesus Christ, His Son. We ask all health care professionals and service providers to reflect their love for life with a true respect for the sacred dignity and integrity of the human person in view of the Church's teachings and we pray that medical researchers and scientists may find, with God's help, a cure for HIV/AIDS as soon as possible. Finally, we beg God our Father that all our brothers and sisters living with HIV/AIDS, together with their families and friends, may be delivered from this terrible scourge and come to find a true peace and deep happiness in the fullness of life which Jesus promises to all of us who have put our trust in the living God.

*Theodore Cardinal McCarrick
Feast of the Divine Mercy, 2003*

FOOTNOTES:

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, Year-End Edition*, Volume 13 (Number 2), table 2.

² Ibid.

³ Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, AIDS Administration, “Maryland HIV/AIDS Epidemiological Profile, Second Quarter – Data reported through June 30, 2002.”

⁴ United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS/World Health Organization, “AIDS Epidemic Update,” December 2002, p. 17.

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, December 30, 1987, 38: *AAS* 80 (1988) 564-566; English translation in *Origins* 17 (1988) 654.

⁶ United Nations General Assembly, Special Session on HIV/AIDS, June 27, 2001, Intervention of Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragan, President of the Pontifical Council on Pastoral Health Care.

⁷ Pontifical Council on Pastoral Health Care, XVII International Conference, “The Identity of Catholic Health Care Institutions,” Rome, November 7, 2002.

⁸ Information provided by Catholic Relief Services, December 2002.

⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In divinis nominibus*, 4, 4.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, September 14, 1995, 116: *AAS* 88 (1996) 70; English translation in *Origins* 25 (1995) 270.

¹¹ World Trade Organization, Plenary Council on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, Genoa, June 20, 2001, Intervention by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the World Trade Organization.

¹² United Nations General Assembly, Special Session on HIV/AIDS, June 27, 2001, Intervention of Archbishop Javier Lozano Barragan, President of the Pontifical Council on Pastoral Health Care.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

The following teaching resources are excellent, though not exhaustive, in understanding the Catholic faith with respect to human life and human love:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1997).

John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Veritatis splendor*, August 6, 1993; *AAS* 85 (1993) 1133-1228; English translation in *Origins* 23 (1993) 297-334.

John Paul II, Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, The Gospel of Life, March 25, 1995; *AAS* 87 (1995) 401-522; English translation in *Origins* 24 (1995) 689-727.

John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, on the role of the Christian family in the modern world, November 22, 1981; *AAS* 73 (1981) 81-191; English translation in *Origins* 11 (1981) 437-468.

John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, on the Christian meaning of human suffering, February 11, 1984; *AAS* 76 (1984) 201-250; English translation in *Origins* 13 (1984) 609-624.

John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Dolentium humanum*, to establish the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Health Care, February 11, 1985; *AAS* 77 (1985) 457-461; English summary in *Origins* 14 (1985) 588.

John Paul II, *Theology of the Body According to John Paul II: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997).

Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), *Love and Responsibility* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1981; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994, 1996).

Paul VI, Encyclical letter *Humanae vitae*, on the regulation of birth, July 25, 1968; *AAS* 60 (1968) 481-503.

Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love: Outlines for Sex Education*, November 1, 1983; *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 12, 1983.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Homosexualitas problema*, on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, October 1, 1986; *AAS* 79 (1987) 543-554; English translation in *Origins* 16 (1986) 377-382.

Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*, December 29, 1975; *AAS* 68 (1976) 77-96; English translation in *Origins* 5 (1976) 485-494.

Pontifical Council for the Family, *From Despair to Hope: Family and Drug Addiction* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992).

Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family*, November 21, 1995; English translation in *Origins* 25 (1996) 529-552.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life*, November 11, 1976.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on School-Based Clinics*, November 18, 1987.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse*, 1990.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, 1991.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Communities of Hope: Parishes and Substance Abuse*, 1991.