



Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Florida on HIV/AIDS **World AIDS Day, December 1, 2005**

"Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me."
(Matthew 25:40)

The grief, anxieties and suffering of the people living with HIV/AIDS, the concerns and worries of their families and friends - these uncertainties and fears also belong to the Body of Christ.

As Catholic Christians, we are called to respond in the manner of Jesus, with care and compassion. As the U.S. Bishops wrote in their pastoral, *Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis*: "Our response to persons living with AIDS must be such that we discover Christ in them and they in turn can encounter Christ in us."

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS estimates 20 million people have died from the AIDS epidemic worldwide since 1981. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) 2003 report, an estimated 930,000 people have been diagnosed with AIDS in the United States. The total number of people living in the U.S. with HIV/AIDS exceeds 1,000,000, and 41% of all newly diagnosed U.S. AIDS cases occurred in people between the ages of 35 and 44. Closer to home, Florida ranks number three among states overall, having one of the highest rates of reported AIDS cases in the U.S. The Florida Division of Disease Control July 2005 Surveillance Report indicates Florida has over 34,900 HIV cases and 99,500 AIDS cases.

Persons living with HIV/AIDS, their friends and families especially need to feel the warmth and caring of their Catholic brothers and sisters throughout their journey of living with this disease. "The one who is seriously ill needs the special help of God's grace in this time of anxiety, lest he or she be broken in spirit and subject to temptations and the weakening of faith." (*Introduction to the Rite of Anointing and Care of the Sick*)

As we have done in the past, we commit the Church in Florida to active HIV/AIDS ministry involving education, pastoral care, advocacy and collaboration. Each of Florida's seven dioceses has designated a person and/or office to coordinate the pastoral care for people with HIV/AIDS, their friends and families. Representatives from each diocese also participate in the Florida Catholic AIDS network (FCAN).

While much remains to be done, much has been done. Through our Florida Catholic Conference, we have approved guidelines for HIV/AIDS policies in our parishes, Catholic schools and Catholic Charities agencies. All of our dioceses have developed policies to ensure that people living with HIV/AIDS are treated compassionately and without discrimination. All of us need to engrave in our hearts the conviction that discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS is more than illegal. It is immoral and unethical by any Christian standard, for it contradicts Jesus' paramount commandment: "Love one another."

We must become pro-active in education, service, and compassionate understanding of those suffering from this disease. The Centers for Disease Control have identified teenagers as one population segment most at risk for contracting HIV/AIDS today. Long before they reach adolescence, we must tell them, in language appropriate to their age level, that bodies are gifts

of God and temples of the Holy Spirit. Adhering fully to the moral principles of the Church, we must teach them about abstinence, chastity and the transmission and prevention of this disease, and make everyone aware that no one, no matter what age, is immune.

In this, as in all other matters, parents should be the primary educators of their children, with our Catholic schools and religious education programs playing an important supportive role. An education in Catholic values requires a partnership between families and the church. Neither can do it alone. Each must reinforce what the other teaches.

Therefore, on the occurrence of World AIDS Day, 2005, we recommit ourselves as Church, as the Body of Christ in Florida, to assure that people living with HIV/AIDS, and their friends and families, experience the comforting love and hope of Jesus. Each diocese has designated a coordinator for HIV/AIDS to assist with education and pastoral care in the parishes and schools. We urge our schools and parishes to implement education about HIV/AIDS for children, teenagers, and adults. Such education needs also focus on helping people form a compassionate attitude toward persons living with HIV/AIDS, their friends, and their families.

We encourage parishes to appoint HIV/AIDS ministry coordinators and form "care teams" to minister to the physical, pastoral, and spiritual needs of people with HIV/AIDS, their friends, and their families. Where possible, this pastoral care should include the provision of direct services as well as support assistance.

We further encourage HIV/AIDS coordinators in each diocese to collaborate with FCAN and other local, state, and national organizations whenever possible. At the same time, we also call for more adequate funding for research, medication, and care for people living with HIV/AIDS from our local, state and federal governments.

We commend the members of the medical, nursing and social service professions for their dedication and leadership in facing this crisis. We affirm our Catholic health facilities for all they have done and continue to do in serving the needs of those people living with HIV/AIDS, and remaining true to the healing, reconciling ministries of the Church.

We call upon all Catholics and people of good will in our state to pray for people with HIV/AIDS, their friends and families and for the discovery of a cure for this disease. We encourage our liturgists to mark December 1, WORLD AIDS DAY, by including pertinent prayers of the faithful on Sundays near this date.

As followers of Christ, we will strive to be His compassionate presence to people, friends and families living with HIV/AIDS. We realize the seriousness of this pandemic. It calls us to a state of urgency. We call on all people to make this time an occasion for grace, conversion, and healing.

We recommit ourselves to responding to Jesus' call to be the hand that reaches out and the voice that carries His words of love and compassion.

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Diocese of Venice

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ
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