

BOOK REVIEWS

Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention – Edited by James F. Keenan assisted by Jon D. Fuller, Lisa Sowle Cahill and Kevin Kelly (New York & London: Continuum, 2000), 351 pages, with an index.

The AIDS pandemic strolls like a colossus throughout planet earth, throughout the Third World, and especially throughout Africa, ravaging and killing in the millions. AIDS may be the greatest assault on humanity in human memory, an assault on the very survival of humans on planet earth. The statistics for the Third World, and in particular for Africa, are frightening. No wonder the scourge has been interpreted as divine retribution for human crimes. In Benin Republic (the site of ancient Dahomey) the servants or priests of Sakpata (the divinity of epidemics – who in the past controlled smallpox) announce AIDS as the new epidemic under Sakpata's control; they administer curative rites and herbs, and advise clients to use condoms. Governments all over the world, and Africa, especially in recent years, are waking up to their responsibility to protect citizens from the ravages of AIDS. Churches and Church leaders appreciate more and more the implacable attack of the epidemic on humanity – it is no longer sufficient to call it a punishment from the God of creation; nor does it suffice to limit the moral rhetoric to the physical, the permission to use or not to use condoms. The larger/holistic picture is that HIV/AIDS concerns the survival of humanity; such a scourge calls for fundamental shifts in moral theology.

The publication of the book under review, *Catholic Ethicists on the HIV/AIDS Prevention*, is timely. It is a record of the determination of moral theologians, in face of the limit situation posed by HIV/AIDS, to advance adequate answers at the same time consonant with the gospel and salvific for the human race. One may ask, after reading through the book, why Catholic ethicists waited so long to produce such a work. Moral science, being a practical science, unfortunately has to follow developments carefully before pronouncing in some competent manner whether certain solutions are in accord or not with a particular moral tradition. "The way moral theology tends to develop does not block progress but allows time and space for the reception of new insights to be tested in a variety of appropriate ways", says Gallagher (p.279).

The bulk of the book, Part 1 (covering over 200 pages), is made up of case studies. The geographical spread of countries from where the cases are taken covers the five continents. Of particular interest for African readers are the cases drawn from high-infection areas like Uganda and South Africa – countries that have even provided volunteers for experiments on new vaccines and drugs. They project situations common all over Africa; issues deriving not only from traditional culture, especially the low status or dependent role of women who are the greatest victims, but also the unjust world economic structures and the fallouts from the apartheid era. But whether cases studied are located in Brazil, Ireland, USA, or Bangladesh, whether they are about challenges from working with homosexuals or heterosexuals, drug addicts, victims infected through blood transfusion, women in labour, or married people who struggle to protect their marriage despite being HIV positive, and having to contend with the inhuman treatment of patients or infected persons as outcasts of society, each case is treated by the narrator competently.

Each case narrated is followed by analysis from the perspective of the Catholic moral tradition. The case studies arise

from true stories and differ immensely from the hypothetical cases that one encounters in the manualist tradition of Catholic moral theology. And because they are true stories, the application of moral rules or principles to individual facts by pastors in the field, or the moral quandary in which social workers, doctors and hospital administrators find themselves, is re-examined by Catholic moral theologians who show by their competent discussion of facts within contexts that there is development in the Catholic moral tradition. Questions raised around proportionate reason and hierarchy of values, distinctions between formal and material cooperation, for example in providing needles to drug addicts or condoms to infected persons who nonetheless remain sexually active and constitute danger to their partners; issues of confidentiality in cases of those who are unwilling to reveal to partners that they are HIV positive because of the social stigma that follow such revelations, and so on, form the stuff with which moral theologians struggle with the tradition and keep the tradition under review. The moral dilemma provoked by the disease is clear in the South African example: on the one hand a pastor counselled an infected couple to maintain total abstinence in line with the “teaching of the church” [a teaching interpreted mechanically] while on the other hand, another pastor reviewed with the same couple values at stake including love, relationship, the sanctity of the marriage bond and factors that protect the bond, and counselled that preservatives or condoms are secondary. This is a good example of the truth of the view expressed in the introduction and conclusion of this book that Catholic moral tradition has the resources to respond positively to the demands of HIV prevention with regard to condom use and needle exchange. Could this be one of the cases in which condom use is pro-life instead of anti-life, life-preserving instead of life-preventing? (p.327).

The second section, Part 2, focuses on foundational moral issues that arise from HIV/AIDS. These issues have been more

or less handled also by the analyses and suggestions or solutions in the first part. But this part takes on systematically the question of the meaning of tradition, of “living tradition,” and the development of tradition in moral theology (following Newman’s criteria for the development of doctrine). The emphasis is that Catholic moral tradition has never been static; it will be strange if a “living” tradition becomes static. This is bound to be so; for the application of moral rules or principles to facts presupposes flexibility as casuistry requires. Focussing on the moral principle of totality Gallagher in his review of the tradition concludes that the anthropological overrides the physical preoccupation in critical moral dilemmas like organ transplant. This is also applicable to the HIV/AIDS debacle.

All contributors to the systematic review of the tradition affirm that it is the human race that is threatened by HIV/AIDS and not simply individual persons. That is why fundamental moral theology should tackle the prime causes of HIV/AIDS and the primary victims – and clearly take on the fundamental issues of justice that arise therefrom. AIDS is a very undemocratic disease; it attacks women more than men, the poor more than the rich; black Americans more than whites. And so the rich Catholic tradition on social justice developed since Leo XIII – emphasising the dignity of the human person, structural sin, the common good, preferential option for the poor, and the principle of subsidiarity – should be brought to bear on the development of the fundamental moral questions around AIDS. Above all, the twin viruses that should first be attacked to ensure the eradication of AIDS are, according to Teresa Okure (quoted by Kevin Kelly), the sexual and economic subordination of women and the unjust world economic order that creates “industries of poverty” (as the late Engelbert Mveng would say) in developing countries. This unjust situation makes people live “amid conditions which are still ‘a yoke little better than that of slavery itself’” (Lisa Cahill quoting *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* no 61 of John Paul II). Catholic moral

imagination is challenged in this time of HIV/AIDS *crisis* to advance courageous principles of morality, according to Enda McDonagh, by taking the necessary *risks* today under the sign of the reign of God. Christians, the church, as disciples of Jesus Christ follow in the footsteps of the all-powerful creator God, who in Jesus Christ identified with the poorest of human beings. God in Jesus Christ today continues to go through a radical *self-emptying* at this opportune moment (*kairos*) of HIV/AIDS to bring about a *new community*, a *new creation*. Consequently, the Church following the divinely inspired risks of God in Jesus is enabled to shed new light on disputable issues around HIV/AIDS like condoms and needles.

In the conclusion to the book, Kevin Kelly made an urgent call on the church and on moral theologians to courageously pass into action – after all ethics is about praxis. Moral theologians should face the challenge of AIDS courageously by providing attractive and positive person-centred teaching on human sexuality that is at the same time human and Christian – at whatever discomfort or risk to their persons: And the church should assume leadership in restoring the dignity of women first within the Church. In order words the church should apply her discourse to herself. Then secondly, there should be a massive movement to free women from dehumanising cultural practices – like African cultural practices that make women easy victims of HIV/AIDS. Then finally there should be a two-way massive action to reduce poverty and its industry in developing countries – by undertaking to tackle Western financial and economic institutions that create and feed poverty outside their borders, and fighting corruption in developing countries especially among the political leadership.

One cannot fault these final recommendations. But it may be necessary to add, especially as an African reader of this book, that our women who are the greatest victims of HIV/AIDS should be more affirmative in the struggle against the structures that make them sexually subordinate to the men. Women leaders,

feminist theologians, should espouse realistic and attractive causes to mobilise rural and urban women to affirm and live their dignity. The struggle for the restoration of the dignity of our women should vacate the elite chair to merge with grassroots realities and challenge poverty, ignorance and unemployment. In a place like Nigeria much publicity is being given today to tackling the highly profitable industry of prostitution, especially in one state that has the highest number of Nigerian girls ferried to Europe for prostitution. Women as well as some men are at the root of this trade. One has to ensure that such a move championed by the wife of the vice-president and full of glamour does not end where the media spotlight ends. Furthermore, in this struggle for the human dignity and equality of all before God, one should tap from the African cultural strength of matrilineal social organisation that may have lost much of its force from the colonial/post-colonial socio-political arrangement and the Christian Churches' exaggeration of male privileges.

The gigantic work of tackling the "industry of poverty"¹, produced by what Pius XI calls "economic nationalism or even economic imperialism" and the "no less deadly and accursed internationalism of finance or international imperialism whose country is where profit is," [Pius XI – Quadragesimo Anno, art. 109] requires a fundamental cultural shift and moral reorientation in the West. This is another limit situation that has fastened around the neck of people of the Third World 'a yoke little better than that of slavery itself'. It necessarily nourishes HIV/AIDS. Nigeria pays each year US\$1.5 billion in debt servicing, a sum larger than the national annual medical or education budget. How can Christians live with this? How should ethicists provide an action programme to take on this aporia? The Nigerian economist Anya O. Anya told Mr Kohler, the Managing Director of the IMF, that "the Nigerian population needs to be convinced that it is moral and fair for the international community to forget that of the more than US\$30 billion that is Nigeria's current debt profile, the principal sum is

less than US\$8 billion – over US\$20 billion arose from interest and penalties from delays in repayment! ...it is difficult to expect the ordinary and suffering people of Nigeria to accept that a four-fold increase in the debt profile in a decade and a half is not the result of some diabolical conspiracy.”²

It does not suffice to say that the kind of poverty experienced in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World where HIV/AIDS is ravaging is intolerable.

Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention has demonstrated a strong and sturdy Catholic moral tradition. The co-optation of scholars from all the continents, from poor and rich countries, from highly infected areas and the less infected, demonstrates the type of collaborative work to develop a more energetic Catholic moral tradition in this time of global transformations. This book should not only be a textbook for sexual ethics but also a companion for social workers, hospital administrators, and pastors working among the poor and especially among brothers and sisters who are HIV/AIDS victims.

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¹ See E. Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World”, in R. Gibellini (ed), *Paths of African Theology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994, pp. 155-165.

² Anya O. Anya, “How Nigeria, IMF can Forge New Partnership for Growth”, *The Guardian*, [Nigeria], Thursday July 13, 2000, page 48.