

Only Education for Life Can Save People – an Interview by Aid to the Church in Need (International Catholic charity) with Irish-born Bishop Hugh Slattery, msc of South Africa

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“Only education for life can save people”

The HIV / AIDS virus has already claimed millions of lives. On the African continent the disease is today threatening entire generations – and with them the development of entire generations. But Bishop Hugh Slattery of Tzaneen in the northeast of South Africa warns against false remedies in the fight against AIDS. In this interview with the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) the 72-year-old bishop speaks out clearly.

In the interview he makes a damning statement about the use of condoms to prevent HIV/ AIDS: “People are not told that the condoms are not safe. In fact there is a failure rate of up to 15% of preventing the spread of AIDS through the use of condoms. In other areas of life nobody would accept this kind of risk. If 15 planes crashed out of every 100 would people still fly?”



Bishop Hugh Slattery

How widespread is HIV/AIDS in South Africa?

Hugh Slattery: “South Africa has the highest rate of infected persons in the world – a sad record indeed. The number of funerals has increased dramatically and nearly every family is touched by this terrible disease. According to one statistic, dated 1st February 2006, almost 1.7 million people have died of AIDS in the past ten years - a figure that corresponds roughly to the entire population of Cape Town. Young people in our new, democratic and no longer racist South Africa should be able to look forward to a happy future, but instead they have to face the fact that death is lurking everywhere.”

How do people react?

Hugh Slattery: “Each person in his own way. Many people attribute death through AIDS to witchcraft. Some blame poverty while others see it as a punishment from God. Anger, mistrust, fear, consternation and confusion abound. Many people simply remain silent, out of shame. Infected people are often avoided and sometimes openly discriminated against; the suffering of many people is great.”

What is the government doing?

Hugh Slattery: “Last year the anti AIDS budget was given money for the distribution of up to 500,000 condoms but probably many of them were never used. The ‘Love Life’ initiative spends millions of Rand each year on condoms as the main part of its so-called ‘safe sex’ or ‘safer’ sex programme. Theoretically, the government and the secular NGOs profess to follow the so-called “ABC Plan” in which A stands for ‘Abstain from sex before marriage’, B for ‘Be faithful to your spouse’, and C for ‘Condomise’. In practice, however, there seems to be a certain stigma around the promotion of abstinence and faithfulness with practically all the focus being on condoms. But what does it achieve? American donors have now suspended their donations for the ‘Love Life’ programme because they have decided it is a waste of money.”

Why is that?

Hugh Slattery: “Well, for one thing there are enormous financial interests involved. The condom industry got a new lease of life with the coming of HIV/AIDS and continues to grow rapidly. The Western world vigorously promotes the sale of condoms in Africa with no respect for religious and African cultural values. They often force governments in Africa to accept condoms along with foreign aid, which is grossly unjust. Unfortunately the people accept this kind of treatment from the West without critically examining the consequences.

What do you recommend?

Hugh Slattery: “There is only one answer. That is the A and B – Abstinence and Fidelity. This was the message given to the South African Bishops by the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI when we met him last year on our Ad Limina visit to Rome. We are aware that this involves self-control and sacrifice. It involves building up character and living in a truly human way and with the Lord’s help it is certainly possible. Moreover it leads to the building up of happy and stable family life as the foundation of the Church and of society. Deep down in

their hearts everybody wants to be part of a happy family. It is indispensable that we take this way forward because our young democracy will then be building upon deep-rooted religious, social, moral and cultural values which themselves serve life and protect the family as the basis of life.”

How do you hope to convey this?

Hugh Slattery: “We have in fact a wonderful success story from which we can all learn, both the Western world and the countries of Africa. The only country that has actually succeeded in significantly checking the spread of HIV/AIDS is Uganda. This is our success story, which is often maligned and misrepresented, in the Western media. President Yoweri Museveni and his wife Janet have taken a clear stance on the issue of AIDS, and the president has formally stated: ‘I demand a return to the traditional cultural practice, which promotes faithfulness and rejects premarital and extramarital sexual relations.’ A favourite slogan of Museveni is ‘What we need is common sense and not condom sense!’ Between 1993 and 1998 the number of pregnant women infected with HIV/AIDS in Uganda was reduced from 25 percent down to 10 percent. By 2001 it was down to 6 percent. This fall is not due to the use of condoms for many men in Uganda reject their use, as I have been assured.”

The Catholic Church is constantly criticised on account of her stance on condoms...

Hugh Slattery: “This is certainly not an honest criticism. Pope Benedict XVI many years before he became Pope responded to this criticism. In an interview with Peter Seewald he described it as complete nonsense. He said that it comes from people who want to talk us out of morality and strip people of all their dignity as human beings by substituting condoms for morality. He said that the condom propaganda is an essential part of this demoralising of people. It expresses an attitude, which really despises people regarding them as of no worth whatsoever. In South Africa the spread of AIDS has long since spiralled out of control because sexual behaviour has become indiscriminate. Condoms do little to help here; indeed, quite the contrary, they tend to encourage this kind of dangerous attitude. If we really want to change this, then we must follow the example of Uganda. After all, continence and faithfulness are not exclusively Christian virtues. They are also elements of all the major world religions, and of the traditional African religions too.”

What is the Catholic Church doing in practice?

Hugh Slattery: “I will give you one example, the project ‘Education for Life’ a behaviour change process started by Sister Kay Lawlor, while she was lecturing in a Teachers Training College in Uganda. Recognising that only a change in sexual behaviour can really effectively combat the spread of AIDS and also that it is indeed possible to influence the behaviour of individuals and communities, she has launched this initiative, together with Sr. Miriam Duggan and others. The ‘Education for Life’ movement is now working in many other African countries. It has three stages: 1. Discover life. Face up to reality and honestly examine your present behaviour. 2. Sketch out a new concept. Choose, and strive to live according to a new and positive manner. 3. Take the necessary steps to move from 1 and 2 – from the old pattern of behaviour to the new one. In this whole process it is essential to ask for God’s help. Take what has helped you to others too. The results have been very encouraging, even though many people don’t want to know about it.”

What is to be done now?

Hugh Slattery: “Let us not be too eager to listen to the West. Much of what they tell us sounds very positive at first – good, tolerant, even liberal and progressive but in reality it is a totally secular approach to life and problems where God doesn’t exist or is irrelevant and the family is of little or no importance. Sex without restraint is held out as the way to go; each person is supposed to find happiness in his or her own way. Many people live in a world of stars and starlets, of TV soap operas. It is an addiction to unlimited pleasure, to materialism and extreme individualism that dominates this culture. But where is that leading us? The great task we now face is to bring moral behaviour back into society. The only effective way to do this is to strengthen the family. Above all in Africa, though not only here, young people have in the past learnt in their families the ways and values that can sustain a society. The family is the first community, the first school, the first Church.”