

## Common Sense in Fighting AIDS

### Interview with Bishop Hugh Slattery, msc of Tzaneen Diocese

by Carrie Gress

**TZANEEN, South Africa, 9 January, 2008 (Zenit.org) - Condoms are not an effective solution in the fight against AIDS, says Bishop Hugh Slattery, and the situation in South Africa proves it.**

In this interview with ZENIT, Bishop Slattery of Tzaneen, South Africa, discusses the award-winning documentary “Sowing in Tears” that he collaborated on with producer Norman Servais, of Metanoia Media. The film, also featuring Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, Archbishop of Durban, South Africa, won the Grand Prix at the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Catholic Films and Multimedia Festival “Niepokalanow 2007.”



Bishop Hugh Slattery with Pope Benedict XVI

**Q:** You have produced an award-winning film about HIV/AIDS in South Africa. In it, you chronicle the dire situation in the Limpopo Province of the country. Can you describe the situation?

**Bishop Slattery:** The situation in this province is by no means the worst in the country — that distinction belongs to KwaZulu Natal. The situation, however, is really bad throughout the country and continues to get worse. The Limpopo Province is one of the poorest in the country. In the adult population, aged 15 and up, the HIV/AIDS prevalence is around 20%. The vast majority of the people living with the disease are totally unaware that they have got it and so it continues to spread at an alarming rate. It has recently been predicted that if HIV/AIDS continues to spread at its present rate, a girl 15 years of age in South Africa today has a 50% chance of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS during her lifetime. For a boy, the infection rate is slightly lower. People are much more aware of AIDS today than they were some years ago, but often their knowledge is poor and inaccurate. This awareness and knowledge, however, seldom translate into action.

**Q:** The film highlights the perpetuation of HIV/AIDS among young people by the lack of parental guidance, changes in the South African government and the influence of outside interest groups. What roles do each of these play in the spread of the disease?

**Bishop Slattery:** Parents really struggle when it comes to giving appropriate guidance to their children. Most of them didn't get that kind of guidance when they themselves were growing up and they generally lack the skills to give it to their children. The transition to democracy in this country has brought about freedom but at a price, especially for young people. There has been an aggressive promotion of a very secular human rights culture for everyone, including children. As a result, parents feel they have no authority over their own children and just let them do what they like. Sometimes children threaten their parents: “If you touch me, I'll tell the police!”

The government passed a very liberal abortion law in the mid-'90s, allowing minors to have abortions without the consent of their parents — they are just counselled, but not obliged, to inform their parents. Recently, the government has also passed legislation allowing same-sex marriages.

Despite the promotion of condoms in schools, there is a high rate of pregnancy among schoolgirls, sometimes as high as 20%. The outside influences promote and consolidate all this kind of behavior. In fact, they make a lot of money out of it through the multimillion-dollar condom business. South Africa and the neighbouring countries of Botswana and Swaziland have the highest rate of HIV/AIDS infection in the world and also the highest rate of condom distribution.

The conclusion is inescapable that more condoms mean more cases of AIDS and more deaths. It is, of course, “politically incorrect” both here and in the Western world to even hint at the possibility that condoms may in fact be fuelling the spread of this deadly disease rather than curbing it.

**Q:** In the film, a very busy funeral home director is interviewed. He says student groups used to be brought to his business to show them the reality of AIDS. This was effective early on, he mentions, but now the children seem little affected by the reality of death. How do the young view the virus?

**Bishop Slattery:** It is quite likely that some children believe they will die of AIDS at a young age. I'm thinking of those who have lost parents and other family members to this disease. It seems that many people have begun to accept all the funerals at weekends as in some way normal. Most of those being buried are young or middle-aged and in the past, such deaths would have been regarded as unusual.

Today, because of AIDS, there is a deep sense of hopelessness and fatalism in the face of it. There is a great deal of pain and suffering, of silence and shame, of anger and guilt, of confusion and blaming of others in families and communities. Earlier this year, after Mass, I asked a group of young girls aged about 11 to 15 about their dreams and their fears for the future. They spontaneously mentioned their greatest fear as that of getting sick.

Just last week, a young woman, who is a home-based caregiver in one of our parishes, said she was going to the funeral of a relative who was the ninth family member or close relative to die this year of the "virus." Yes, death is surely close to the minds of many children in our situation.

Our society is traumatized and paralyzed as the pandemic continues out of control and the number of AIDS orphans and child-headed households increases steadily.

**Q:** What are some of the creative ways the Church is implementing to stop the spread of the disease, especially given the pervasive belief that condoms are the key to managing it?

**Bishop Slattery:** As a Church, we are trying to lift the veil of secrecy and denial around HIV/AIDS and get people to talk about it openly. It is certainly difficult to do this, especially with men. People are totally brainwashed into believing that in fact there is no real crisis. They see that a lot of the younger generation are dying but are told that people get AIDS because they don't use the condom correctly to have "safe sex." Behind this is the widespread belief that people who die of AIDS have been bewitched.

The first and decisive step is to try and convince people that there is a problem, in fact a real national crisis. That is the aim of the first DVD, "Sowing in Tears."

The next step is to show people in a convincing manner that there is also an answer. That is the aim of the second DVD, "The Change Is On," showing that abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage will quickly stop the spread of AIDS. The third DVD will deal with caring for the sick, the dying, and the AIDS orphans, and the last one with marriage and family as the real solution to the AIDS pandemic.

**Q:** The other film you mentioned has just been completed. "The Change Is On" documents the Ugandan approach to the fight against AIDS through abstinence education. Why is Uganda frequently held up as a model of success and are others following, given that country's effectiveness?

**Bishop Slattery:** Uganda was the first country to really take a strong stand against the AIDS pandemic from the early '90s. The strong and clear leadership of President Museveni was the decisive element in bringing down the spread of HIV/AIDS from over 25% to 6% by 2002. He preached "common sense" and not "condom sense" as he mobilized his country in promoting abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage as cultural values.

He said, "I have emphasized a return to our cultural values that emphasized fidelity and condemned premarital and extramarital sex." Uganda is rightly held up as a model for Africa and the world in stemming the spread of HIV/AIDS. Frequently, however, especially in the Western media, the reason for Uganda's success is not given truthfully. It is falsely claimed that condom promotion was the main reason for the country's success. This misrepresentation along with the aggressive and dishonest promotion of condoms seem to be the main reasons why other countries have been rather slow in following Uganda's lead by opting strongly for abstinence and fidelity in the war against AIDS.

It is highly unlikely that World AIDS Day will ever have "abstain and be faithful" as its theme. It is a response that builds character, ensures good family life, costs nothing and has a 100% guarantee of success. Recently in this country, there have been some murmurs in high government circles about the role of abstinence and fidelity in combating AIDS. Hopefully, the murmurs will increase and convictions will grow stronger about this foolproof solution as we look to Uganda for inspiration in turning back the onslaught of AIDS.

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ZENIT is a non-profit internet-based international news agency comprising a team of professionals and volunteers who are convinced of the extraordinary richness of the Catholic Church's message, particularly its social doctrine. The ZENIT team sees this message as a light for understanding today's world.

At the same time, they are aware that this richness is little known in the information world. This motivates them to strive to bring this message to the Internet, in the greatest possible number of languages.

Their objective is to inform about the "world seen from Rome" with professionalism and faithfulness to the truth. They aim to view the modern world through the messages of the Pope and the Holy See; tell about the happenings of the Church; and inform about the topics, debates, and events that are especially interesting to Christians worldwide. ZENIT carries out this service independently.

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