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EBOLA SURVIVORS AND CONDOM USE: *FACTS AND INSIGHTS*

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Introduction

Positive reflection is a response to many requests. This reflection is not intended to be a heavy academic tome. Its patchwork of theological comments and practical resources is meant to reflect the journey which many Sierra Leoneans have undertaken, living in a world with the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD).

There is still much to do, not least in understanding the theological reality of Ebola. Thankfully, for the most part, we no longer debate the ethics of a compassionate care response. We do need, however, to engage in a more

rigorous debate about the positive moral principles involved in Ebola prevention. We need to identify and value the ethical dimension inherent in a commitment to prevent the further spread of Ebola. We must begin to celebrate the core values which unite all people of good will in the face of this pandemic.

There is no doubt that the deadly Ebola epidemic in the West African countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia is an unprecedented tragedy. In just a couple of months, the epidemic has claimed the lives of thousands coupled with its devastating socio-economic consequences. According to Dr. Margaret Chan, the Director-General of WHO Special Session of the Executive Board on Ebola, ‘what began as a health crisis



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quickly escalated into a humanitarian, economic and security crisis. Schools, markets, businesses, airline and shipping routes and borders closed. Tourism shut down, further deepening the blow to struggling economies. Countries resorted to using their defence and military forces for the command and control of containment centres.’¹

This paper aims at raising some critical pastoral questions worth the sober reflection of pastoral agents in Sierra Leone and the sub-region in dealing with the current Ebola crisis since there is the need for a pastoral approach that better reflects the reality of people’s lives.

¹ Webpage: http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2015/executive_board/en/

Acute Fears Regarding EVD

Recently there are tangible signs of hope that the war against the Ebola scourge will be won. Cases are visibly dwindling in all three countries. There are even speculations that, by April, our country Sierra Leone would reach the zero new infection of Ebola target. However, as many have warned, there is still no room for complacency. Even a single Ebola case has the potential of causing an upsurge in new cases and subsequent fatalities.

Today we have a considerable number of Ebola survivors (exceeding two thousand in Sierra Leone) who could further infect and re-infect thousands of their compatriots thus exacerbating the already critical situation. Medics and clinicians have maintained that one of the quickest means



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of transmitting the virus to others is through sexual intercourse. In fact, there are a few reported cases of Ebola survivors infecting their partners via sexual intercourse in spite of the stern warning from health workers that they (Ebola survivors) should refrain from sexual intercourse about three months or more after being discharged. Facts on the grounds, however, do show that that warning is not usually heeded by some survivors resulting in the infection of their partner(s).

Given the severity of this outbreak and to minimize or avoid those high risk situations, health workers and NGOs are advocating the supply of condoms to all Ebola survivors as one means of curbing the transmission of the virus.

Now the crucial questions for Catholics are these: Is using condoms for Ebola prevention pro life since they help save lives or is it anti-life given the Church's official teaching on this subject-matter? Should Ebola survivors who are Catholics go ahead in using condoms to save themselves or their partners? What is the pastorally expedient advice that pastoral agents could give to their parishioners viz a viz this issue? Is condom use justified in the case of monogamous married couples?

Not only can Ebola paralyze people with fear as a result of myths and misconceptions, it can also lead to indiscriminate fear of people with EVD, prejudice and even violation of basic human rights. It can prevent the people of God from responding to the call of the Gospel to



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serve, to heal, to liberate, following the pattern of Jesus' own ministry. At the same time people with EVD, and those who stand by them, are afraid to begin the dialogue which must lead to the corporate response of care, compassion, sensitivity and justice.

Ebola Survivors and Condom Use: A Case For Monogamous Married Couples.

The problem of EVD is so complex that no hurried ethical judgment should be made. Our reflections here should be seen only as wake-up call towards a pastoral evaluation. One day when all aspects of the EVD question have been clarified, society as a whole will have to pass ethical judgment in this matter.

May we hasten to state that this paper does not, in any way, seek to challenge the wisdom of the Catholic Church's teaching that married couples must be faithful to each other and that the unmarried must abstain from sexual activities until marriage. Secondly the authors of this article is not unmindful of the Church's concern that promotion of condom use will lead to irresponsible, risky sexual behaviour (promiscuity and prostitution). As such the condom debate contained in this piece of writing is completely detached from the moral question of sex outside marriage. Rather it is a case for monogamous married couples in which a partner is an Ebola survivor. The question most often being asked is whether the Catholic Church should revisit its position on condom use in certain cases.



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A world crisis and its harrowing and heroic stories of human suffering require religious response and reflection, some fresh theological consideration. The EVD crisis has some distinctive characteristics beyond its global range and salvage suddenness, as it brings together in such devastating mix the great human powers of sex and death. How this mix affects theology must be given a primary concern. The moral growth into values has to start from where people are and everything morally possible must be done to help them survive into the period of growth.

Our concern is based on the fact that, over the years, certain highly placed Church leaders like Cardinal Barragan, Cardinal Danneels of Brussels, Cardinal Georges Cottier (theologian to the papal household),

Cardinal Christian Tumi of Cameroon, Archbishop Boniface Lele of Kenya, Bishop Kevin Dowling of South Africa, Bishop Filipe Arizmendi of Mexico, Bishop Juan Antonio Martinez Camino of Spain and most recently Bishop Gilles Cote of Papua New Guinea have publicly suggested that restricted condom use may be acceptable/justifiable in certain circumstances to prevent HIV/AIDS. Could this be applicable in the case of preventing epidemic-prone diseases like Ebola?

In fact, Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, head of the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, is one of many who explicitly noted that there has been no definitive papal statement on the subject of condom use and AIDS. In fact, this issue is not commented on in the



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Catechism of the Catholic Church. Some individuals have made remarks, but that is not the same as an official position.² He is among those who has offered his personal view that the use of condoms may be justified as an act of self-defence. 'If an infected husband wants to have sex with his wife who isn't infected, then she must defend herself by whatever means necessary'.³ Other theologians have expressed the opinion that condom use is justified as a form of health protection.

In April 2006, the Late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ, in response to a very specific question from the bioethicist

² Cardinal J. L. Barragan, quoted by John Thavis in Vatican News Letter, *AIDS and Condom: Issue far from Settled at the Vatican*, 12th December, 2003, **Catholic News Service**

³ Cardinal Barragan words quoted by Stacey Meichtry in *National Catholic Reporter*, 25th February, 2005.

Ignazio Marino, opined that, in certain cases, the usage of condoms might be allowable stating, 'The use of condoms can, in certain situations, be a lesser evil'.⁴

Bishop Kevin Dowling said that the Aids crisis in South Africa requires the Church to permit the use of condoms to stop "transmitting death."⁵

Even Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 said that condom use can be justified in some cases to help stop the spread of Aids. The one example he cited as a possibly appropriate use was by male prostitutes. The Vatican further clarified that "the pope does not morally justify the

⁴ Interviewed with the Italian Weeekly Magazine, *L'Espresso*, 21st April 2006

⁵ Archbishop Kevin Dowling in response to a question by *Catholic News Agency* reporter during a Bishops Conference Meeting in South Africa, 30th July 2001.



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disordered exercise of sexuality, but maintains that the use of the condom to diminish the danger of infection may be “a first assumption of responsibility”, as opposed to not using the condom and exposing the other person to a fatal risk.”⁶

Why shouldn't that exception be applied to legitimately married couples in which one partner is infected?

Conclusion - Personal Reflection

The pandemic of the Ebola infection and illness does not necessarily raise new questions about human living, rather it provides us with the opportunity to revisit and sharpen the focus of those questions that we have avoided or failed

to deal with adequately: Death, dying, disability, sex and sexuality, health, truth, equality, justice.

Now considering the compassionate and non-judgmental stance that the Church should show towards the weakest, most vulnerable and marginalised people in society who are shouldering the brunt of this Ebola scourge, we would like to go in line with the position of the above-mentioned eminent Church leaders in suggesting that while unmarried people should abstain from pre-marital and extra-marital sex, legally married Catholic couples {in which a partner is infected} should be allowed a limited use of condoms, coupled with some counselling, so that the rate of Ebola transmission and re-infection would continue to dwindle and eventually be eliminated.

⁶ Zenit, Jesuit Priest, Fr. Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican Press Office
21st November 2010: 'Statement on Pontiff's Words Regarding Condoms'



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This position makes no claim to be absolute nor does it necessarily imply that the Church's teaching on condom use has been abandoned or even undermined. But as Redemptorist Father Brian Johnstone, a Moral Theologian at Rome's Alphonsianum Academy maintained, there is need to understand the difference between two levels of moral discourse: one is a moral rule, the other the application of that rule in a complex situation. Considering how to apply a norm in a particular situation is not to undermine the norm.⁷

We know some would argue that ebola survivors are barely given a limited time (about three months) to abstain from sexual intercourse compared to AIDS patients who

sometimes must refrain from sexual intercourse for years. However, given the deadly nature of the Ebola virus and being an epidemic-prone disease, it is prudential to stop it by whatever legitimate means in order to save the lives of thousands more from untimely deaths.

⁷ Quoted by John L. Allen Jr. in National Catholic Reporter, 16th January, 2004.