



## **Missionary Prayer Intention - February: The Pope's missionary prayer intention "That the fight against disease and epidemics in the third world may be supported in a spirit of solidarity by ever more generous collaboration from the governments of all nations".**

### **Comment by Mgr. Lorenzo Piva, Officer at the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples**

Vatican City (Fides Service) - The missionary intention for the month of February concerns the fight against disease and epidemics in the Third World. It touches therefore on one of the scourges of our day, which sectional and drowsy information prefers to consign to oblivion: AIDS. In this regard in the post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* we read: "Against the background of widespread poverty and inadequate medical services the Synod considered the tragic scourge of AIDS which is sowing suffering and death in many parts of Africa. It noted the role played in the spread of this disease by irresponsible sexual behaviour and drafted this strong recommendation: "The companionship, joy, happiness and peace which Christian marriage and fidelity provide, and the safeguard which chastity gives, must be continuously presented to the faithful, particularly the young".(223)». The battle against AIDS ought to be everyone's battle. Echoing the voice of the Synod Fathers, I too ask pastoral workers to bring to their brothers and sisters affected by AIDS all possible material, moral and spiritual comfort. I urgently ask the world's scientists and political leaders, moved by the love and respect due to every human person, to use every means available in order to put an end to this scourge." [EiA 116].

"Whenever you go into a town where they make you welcome, eat what is put before you. Cure those in it who are sick, and say, "The kingdom of God is very near to you" [Lk 10,8-9]. The World Social Forum, held 20-25 January 2007 in Nairobi Kenya, has just come to an end. This alternative to the World Economic Forum, the first was held in Porto Alegre, in Brazil in 2001, has become a meeting for social movements. This was the first time the Forum was held in Africa. The Nairobi Forum was a good opportunity to give voice to Africa, to its people and their thirst for a life of dignity. All kinds of themes were treated including diseases and especially HIV/AIDS. Twenty five years on. A quarter of a century has passed since Africa recorded the first outbreaks of AIDS which devours its victims to the bone. For a long time AIDS was covered with a curtain of silence and prejudice and this was also a cause of its rapid diffusion to the point that it has become a disease which evokes forgotten epidemics. Today the wall of silence which used to surround AIDS is crumbling. The disease is at the centre of world attention: prevention policies are elaborated, treatment is distributed, funds are collected to fight it. In fact not even one country in the world, rich or poor, has been spared by AIDS. What is more, the prejudice that the infection would spread only among the categories at risk, has been belied by the fact that the virus has reached many different social strata.

Encouraging news. Many governments and the international communities itself are planning vast scale programmes. Progress in medical treatment is rapid and the price of medicine is falling. This means more people have access to treatment. However what has been done is still too little because for the globalisation of the virus there is no corresponding globalisation of access to treatment.

The case of Malawi. The situation in many countries in central southern Africa is still dramatic. In Malawi for example a greater part of the population is HIV positive. This information is distressful but it fails to reach the screens of world networks. Not enough attention is given to the children who suffer the most serious consequences. Indeed their needs are undervalued. Until quite recently the number of children directly or indirectly affected by AIDS was not even calculated. Only in 2000 there appeared the first statistics at world level on the number of minors who had lost one or both parents because of AIDS. While generations of children and adolescents have never known a world without AIDS. They are the generations most exposed. Moreover, a growing number of newborn infants come into this world already infected by their HIV+ mothers. And thousands

of adolescents, many unknowingly, contract the virus, jeopardising their present and their future.

AIDS orphans. An increasing number of parents die leaving children exposed to disease and poverty. Not only deprived of their childhood, these little ones have to care for the old people. Sometimes, worse still, they have to assume prematurely the role of head of the family and take care of younger siblings. There is a shortage of teachers, decimated by the disease. In some sub-Saharan countries AIDS has undermined the entire school system and children's right to education .

Statistics. Today in the world: every minute another child dies because of AIDS, every day 6,000 youngsters aged 15 to 17 contract the HIV virus, every year 650,000 babies inherit AIDS from their mothers, in the world more than 2 million children and 12 million young people are HIV+ , 15 million children are orphans because of AIDS, almost half of the new cases of AIDS affect young people under 25, children are still the invisible face of AIDS.

In the centuries to come the West could be accused of genocide, according to American Jesuit doctor Father Angelo D'Agostino, in Kenya who has fought the impossible cost of therapy and the patent monopoly faced by Africans dying by the million. "What can we say with regard to the tragedy of Aids and its devastating consequences in Africa?", Pope John Paul II asked in his Message for World Day of the Sick 1997. "Millions of people are affected by this scourge, many infected at birth. Humanity cannot close its eyes to such a distressing tragedy. It is necessary to press public opinion to convince pharmaceutical companies to lower the prices of medicines or grant patents to produce them".

Awareness is the first step on the stairway of insistent and fervent prayer to God the Father who watches over His children with tender love . (Mgr. Lorenzo Piva) (Agenzia Fides 29/1/2007, righe 73, parole 1.060)