

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE SUFFERING OF INNOCENT AIDS VICTIMS

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INTRODUCTION

Almost every day, hundreds of innocent lives fall victim, either at the hands of others, or due to natural disasters. Historical events, such as the havoc of Hiroshima,¹ the holocaust,² and the bubonic plague,³ are examples of calamities that have resulted in the loss of millions of innocent lives, leaving countless others to suffer. But, the most dangerous, I think, is the AIDS epidemic, which is currently increasing at an alarming rate, and is threatening the world population. It is more dangerous, because, even with modern scientific research and technology, a cure has not yet been discovered, and the deadly virus is spreading rapidly and unchecked.

Globally, more than 25 to 30 million people are infected with HIV, and the figure is multiplying dramatically.⁴ According to Dr Clement Malau, of the PNG National AIDS Council, almost 100 Papua New Guineans contract the AIDS virus every month.⁵ Unfortunately, more than half of these are

¹ The atomic bomb that the US dropped on Hiroshima during the Second World War in 1945 killed some 200,000 people. Stanley Weinstein, "Hiroshima", in *Kodasha Encyclopedia of Japan* 3 (1983), p. 149.

² During the Second World War, some six million European Jews died in the concentration camps of the Nazis. Stuard Berg Flexner, et al, eds, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edn, unabridged, New York NY: Random House, 1987, p. 912.

³ The bubonic plague, known as the Black Death, of the 14th century killed almost a quarter of the population [*Ibid.*, p. 217].

⁴ Lawrence Hammar, "AIDS, STDs, and Sex Work in Papua New Guinea", in *Modern Papua New Guinea*, Tamakushi: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998, p. 257.

⁵ *Post-Courier*, June 5, 2002, p. 29.

innocent victims. They are either mothers, who are victimised by unfaithful husbands, or *vice versa*, children by infected parents, women by rapists, and youngsters from promiscuous, premarital sex. How can the innocents bear the injustice done to them? This is the principal issue I intend to address in this paper.

My reflection begins with the image in a media advertisement of the campaign against AIDS. I acknowledge that there are innocent husbands, who are victimised by unfaithful wives, but, for this particular paper, my focus is on mothers and children. When televised on EMTV, the victim mother reveals in a low, sad voice,

I never thought AIDS would affect my family.
I was always faithful to my husband, but he got the virus.
It was only when I gave birth that I found out, I got the AIDS
virus . . .
and now my baby has it, too.⁶

In this simple, but highly emotional, statement, she expresses her innocence, and the intensity of her suffering.

THE NATURE OF SUFFERING

Suffering is an experience of physical, mental, and/or psychological pain, which results from a disorder in one's life, that poses a threat to one's very existence. Furthermore, "Suffering is something, which is still wider than sickness, more complex, and, at the same time, still more deeply rooted in humanity itself."⁷ When innocent people are victimised by HIV/AIDS, they understandably undergo a time of intense suffering.

Although suffering from HIV/AIDS is universal, each individual experience differs. In addition to the associated illnesses, and the inevitable deprivation of life, men often experience suffering, in terms of loss of their job, strength, fame, prestige, and the like, which are more external, whereas women will be

⁶ This particular advertisement appears frequently, both on EMTV, and in PNG newspapers.

⁷ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Editrice Vaticana (1983), p. 7.

more likely to experience inner suffering, such as that of the woman in the media advertisement: “and now my baby has it, too”. Their suffering comes from within, ranging from loss of dignity, to severe depression, as a result of betrayal of love, and loss in a relationship.

PAIN OF BETRAYAL

A woman enters marriage with the hope of a good and lasting relationship with her husband, and of them being able to raise a happy family. However, the unfaithfulness of the husband poses a threat to the well-being of the mother, and thus jeopardises her hope for a better future.

On realising the unfaithfulness of her husband, she will feel rejected, perhaps concluding that he no longer loves her, otherwise he would not have gone to other women, thus ending up with the AIDS virus. As a result, her self-esteem is jeopardised. She feels useless, and neglected by the person she is committed to share her life with.

The pain of betrayal is a bitter experience, especially if one’s best friend has betrayed you. The mother in the advertisement declares that she was always faithful to her husband, but it was he who got the virus, and victimised her. This is outright betrayal. For the love and faithfulness that she offered him all the years, she is “rewarded” with the deadly virus. It is the worst form of betrayal imaginable. It is like Judas handing over Jesus to those who would crucify him. Innocent people, who have been, or are being, victimised, are in this situation, experiencing extreme suffering, brought upon them by unfaithful partners.

DEPRESSION FROM REJECTION

In addition, our Papua New Guinean society, being more patriarchal, accuses such innocent mothers, and denies them social contact. Even their families, in fear of contracting the virus, and/or out of shame, frequently refuse to offer any help. Hence, they feel like outcasts and aliens in their own family and society. All these factors further intensify their suffering.

Such rejection can be unbearable, especially when they are innocent. How can they live positively in a society that rejects them? There have been

several AIDS-related suicides, because the suffering of rejection was too much for them. I have been told by a witness, of a young girl from Minj, in Western Highlands Province, who locked herself in, and burnt down the house, because the people accused her, and even her own family rejected her, for bringing shame upon them.⁸ This is just one example of many similar unpublicised incidents happening in our society today.

Rejection is also true for infants, who are born with the virus. In cases where their parents are sick or dying with AIDS, and are unable to care for them, many relatives seem to ignore the infected babies. They see them as useless. I have seen some such children being looked after by the Charity Sisters in Port Moresby.

DEPRIVATION OF LIFE

Every human person has a right to life. We plan for our future with bright hopes and dreams, but not everyone lives long enough to achieve these goals, because they die young, due to natural causes, or at the hands of other people. Like many other victims, the mother in the advertisement knows that she and her baby will not live long enough to actualise their plans and dreams in life. Knowing that her death is inevitable, she experiences a thorn in the flesh. What is more painful, as a mother, is the thought of her other children, who will have to struggle through life as orphans, without their mother. Who will love and care for them? In societies, like those in Melanesia, where family ties are quite strong, dying mothers can be assured that their relatives will care for their children. Even then, for a mother to die young, leaving her children orphans, would be more painful than if one had no children.

Unlike the suffering of those involved in accidents, or other calamities, that causes instant death, and where the duration of pain is short, such mothers, who are victimised with the HIV/AIDS virus, experience a prolonged suffering. They live, knowing that death is imminent. How would such a mother possibly cope with life? Such suffering is a nightmare.

⁸ Personal communication, Br Paul Walua from Mt Hagen.

In order to assist victims, humanitarian measures have been taken, worldwide. Medical specialists work around the clock to help people live longer, while social workers and psychotherapists volunteer to offer specialised counselling, with the hope of restoring lost self-esteem. The results are quite commendable, but, with a cure yet to be discovered, suffering persists. The only hope for many is to look to God. Some ask, hoping for some sort of miracle, but to no avail.

Where is the loving God (John 3:16) that Christianity preaches about? What kind of a God lets the innocent suffer unjustly? Such questions linger in the troubled minds of many victims. For them, life seems to become an experience of “hell”. They discover the fact that “The world we live in often seems very far from the one promised us by faith. Our experiences of evil, and suffering, injustice, and death, seem to contradict the good news.”⁹ To all sentiments, what would be the proper Christian response?

DIFFERENT RESPONSES

1. FUNDAMENTALIST APPROACH

People respond differently to the issue, according to their diverse attitudes. Some respond in a fundamentalist way, believing that AIDS is a punishment from God. In Wabag town, a preacher once said that, because the world is full of evil, with licentious sexual practices, God has sent AIDS to eliminate this evil generation, just as he did to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:12-29). Some even go to the extreme of interpreting the illness as one of the seven bowls of God’s wrath, given in the book of Revelation (16:1-21). They condemn all people, who have the virus, and classify them as sinners. This trend of thought is still in the minds of many, though it is not as widespread as it was a few years ago.

The converse of thinking that AIDS affects sinners is to think that good people will not catch the virus, even if they have sexual relations with infected persons, or engage in other means of contracting the virus, such as blood transfusion, tattooing, etc.¹⁰ In that case, what about the many

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #164.

¹⁰ Movement leaders have been heard preaching this in some Catholic churches.

innocent mothers and children, who are being infected everywhere, which is the subject matter of my concern here? This fundamentalist response to the situation is unChristian and inhuman.

On the contrary, there are some, who rely on miracles. These people assure the victims of God's healing power, and pray for the victims, encouraging them to repent, and to believe that God will heal them. Of course, miraculous healings are possible through God's divine grace and mercy.¹¹ But even the most intense prayers do not always obtain the healing of all illnesses.

2. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Some people take a middle course, trying to be neither judgmental nor to rely entirely on divine intervention. I prefer to call this the humanitarian approach. Here, people play the role of the good Samaritan. They sympathise with the victims, and give humanitarian aid, as a means of comforting them. Some even offer them the love and concern denied by the victims' own families and community. By caring for the sick, they fulfil the mission Jesus entrusts to every Christian. But, does our sympathy heal their deepest hurts? Is their fundamental problem, the question of their innocent suffering, solved by our love and concern? Maybe, to certain extent, it is, but sympathy does not eradicate the root cause, nor does it give any better coping strategy. In fact, it could make them feel even more helpless and dependent. I don't argue that this approach is wrong. However, my question is whether it is sufficient to address the problem at stake.

While, on the one hand, people who have contracted the HIV virus might be relieved to be helped, on the other hand, they might feel unhappy to be regarded as a handicap in their family and society, when they feel that they can still live a normal life. Here, I refer to those who are HIV positive, but still strong and well enough to look after themselves and their family for some time – like the mother on the media advertisement. I doubt if they would be comfortable to be addressed as HIV/AIDS victims, since our

¹¹ At Teremanda village, near Wabag, an interdenominational group of about seven to ten women usually go to pray for AIDS victims. I personally witnessed one full-blown AIDS victim, who was miraculously healed through them in 2001.

society tends to portray such a negative image of those who are tested and found to be positive.

If love and concern, in the form of material support, cannot completely liberate them from the misery of suffering, then what else would be a better means? At this point, what really matters is to venture deeper into the mystery of suffering.

3. JESUS THE MODEL

The suffering of the innocent is part of the issue of the problem of evil. It is a mystery that many find difficult to understand – like Job in the Old Testament, who could not comprehend why, innocent though he was, he had to suffer unjustly. The only solution lies in the suffering of Jesus. We have to approach the question of the origin of evil through our faith in the One who conquered evil.

Although He was innocent, Jesus experienced the same kind of betrayal from Judas, rejection from His own people, and even felt totally abandoned by His Father, as indicated by his utterance of Ps 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me.” The innocent victims can be assured that, even if the world is against them, and that God seems to be far away, at least they can be assured that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, went through that experience. There is no guarantee, but perhaps this will make some sense to the innocent AIDS victims, who are suffering from betrayal, and rejection, and are in danger of abandoning their faith. Even then, they might still wonder why Jesus suffered, and why we have to follow suit?

Jesus did not suffer for nothing. His suffering had redemptive significance. Foreseeing our salvation, He willingly accepted suffering, and eventually, death. Similarly, in order for one to accept suffering, one needs to unveil its salvific dimension, in the light of Jesus’ suffering.

SALVIFIC DIMENSION OF SUFFERING

In May, 2001, I attended a youth rally in Goroka. During one of the sessions, a woman named Margaret was invited to give a talk on AIDS.¹² During the session, she raised the same sentiments as the victim mother on the media advertisement. However, she added further,

At first, I was frustrated with my husband for giving me the virus . . . but I forgave him. And now, I am not ashamed any more, but, instead, am happy to come out and be actively involved in the campaign against AIDS. I want to share my experience with many others, so that they can prevent themselves from getting AIDS.¹³

Here is a concrete example of an innocent mother, who has found meaning in her suffering, through the light of Christ's redemptive suffering. Furthermore, a person not only discovers the salvific meaning of his/her suffering, but above all, he/she becomes a complete new person, and has a new calling in life, as we see in the example of Margaret.

One victim revealed this during an interview, "AIDS is a real blessing for me, because it has made me confront and resolve issues, which, otherwise, I wouldn't have to face."¹⁴

Like Margaret, or the mother on the media advertisement, some others also come to perceive their suffering as life giving, not only for themselves, but also for the whole community. Max and Maura Mea are a young couple, who are both HIV positive, but are actively involved in the campaign against AIDS. Max says, "People, who are HIV positive, can contribute a lot to

¹² Margaret is an innocent AIDS victim, whose husband died some years ago. She is a mother from Ialibu, SHP, and is currently actively involved in the campaign against AIDS. She goes to many different places to share her experience of living positively with the virus.

¹³ From Margaret's speech on AIDS to youths at The 5th Highlands Regional Catholic Youth Rally in Goroka, May 2001.

¹⁴ Steve Pizaro, "The Church has AIDS", in *Compass* 25-1 (1991), p. 33.

PNG by sharing their experiences of the disease, and by educating others about its dangers.”¹⁵

The fact that these people are now ready to share their experience of living with HIV/AIDS is a positive sign that they have overcome their suffering, by discovering a new life within their very suffering – a life free from depression and sense of uselessness, to reach out to love others. This discovery is possible only by uniting one’s own suffering with that of Christ.¹⁶

Additionally, the lives of innocent children, like the baby in the media advertisement, have a special message for us. With no voice uttered, they pronounce to the world that human life is on the brink of extinction, since the prime means of transmitting the virus is through the very means of procreation.

In this way, “Suffering . . . acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.”¹⁷ Paul exclaimed, “I am now rejoicing in my suffering for your sake, and, in my flesh, I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of His body, that is the church” (Col 1:24).

In practice, to live positively with AIDS is not easy, yet some have accepted it in a positive way. Many more are still suffering, and, each day, the number increases. To be judgmental, and ignore them, is unChristian and inhuman. Longing for divine intervention cannot be relied upon. Mere sympathy, and a show of solidarity with the suffering, are good, but do not eradicate the problem. What then is the best way to relate to them?

CONCLUSION

If some people have reached the stage of living positively with the HIV/AIDS virus, then there is the chance that others, who are suffering with the same virus, can do likewise. It is the prime responsibility of everyone in society to assist the victims, in the best possible way for them to come to this stage.

¹⁵ “Hope for Living”, in *The National: The Weekender*, Friday, May 31, 2002, p. 4.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1521.

This can be achieved by helping them to realise their usefulness in the community, and the life-giving aspect of their suffering. It can only be possible if we can clearly show how God can be present in the midst of their suffering, and even in death.

Counsellors, religious personnel, and all Christian faithful have a very important role in this – to help them accept their suffering, in the light of Christ’s innocent suffering, and to live positively with it. This will surely make a great difference in their lives. Their positive living could also be life giving for others.

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