

**Caritas Europa Regional Conference, 2006
Mainz, Germany**

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The issue of HIV/AIDS

Caritas witness: *Cristian Ciulin*

Expert theologian: *Fr. Robert J. Vitillo*

Moderator: *Dominic Verhoeven*

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1. **Presentation and input by Caritas witness, Cristian Ciulin** on Caritas Romania's work in the field of HIV-AIDS
 - Initiation of activities in April 1990 with the help of British volunteers. Work started by meeting children in a hospital of infectious diseases "Colentina". These children had one thing in common all of them were HIV positive and had been abandoned by their families aged between 3 months and 3 years.
The first steps were made to provide emergency assistance to these children back in 1990. Followed by a new approach in 1992 when new concept of tender loving and care was introduced and 2 family houses were established. Between 1993 and 1996 4 more family houses were opened by Health Aid for children from Colentina Hospital, 2 of which were supported by Caritas Bucharest. During the same period new program were developed to address issues of general education of children, health education and education program for public institutions which were unacceptable before in public schools.
 - Initiation of the ARV treatment brings major change in children's health and future perspectives. Caritas Houses had no more fatal cases among its children. Social activities increased and social inclusion intensified.
 - 1997-2006 A Family House becomes a model of caring and a family environment for abandoned children. After recognition of number of international organization, the model is now accepted on national level, but in the population much more work needs to be done for accepting understanding the concept.
 - In every day life, family has its role in assuring children's psycho social stability.
 - The children see the social parents as their own parents; they are equals and consider themselves a family.
 - The new component of this program currently under development is training children for future independent life.

2. **Response by Expert theologian Fr. Robert Vitillo and input on "Pandemic of HIV: Continuing Challenge to Caritas, Church, Europe and Entire World"**
 - Fr. Vitillo- having worked in Romania, both in the capacity of Caritas as well as an advisor to UNICEF, shared his knowledge and experience with HIV/AIDS issue in Romania, the stigmatization and isolation of the infected people.
 - Some basic figures of the infected adults and children in the world.
 - People living with HIV-40.3 million; new HIV infections in 2005-4.9 million; deaths due to aids in 2005-3.1 million; about 14000 new HIV infections a day in 2005;
 - HIV AIDS affect all areas of social life, increased gender inequality, professional technical skills lost, orphans and vulnerable children, drain on

health resources, human rights, economic impact, life expectancy. Sickness, poverty, death

- Poverty: lost productivity, high costs of health care, structural vulnerability, lower education status, reduced national income, lower school enrolment,
- Precipitation factors affecting HIV infected and migrants/refugees: Poverty, unemployment, socio-economic instability
- Limited access to social, education and health services, discrimination and exploitation, alienation and a sense of anonymity.
- Mitigate the impact: care and support, prevention, advocacy, reduce the risk, decrease personal vulnerability factors, societal vulnerability factors;
- Response of the Catholic Church to pandemic of HIV aids: teaching, service, pastoral care. Pope John Paul II acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS, Southern Africa Catholic Bishops reject teaching that aids result from Gods wrath; Bishops of Chad reject faith based discrimination; South African Bishops will tell young men to respect young women; church looks at both individual and social values and considers inequitable access to economic resources as an important factor.
- Biblical faith motivates the church to include people with HIV and AIDS in its care and support services.
- More pastoral care is needed for people suffering with HIV and AIDS regardless many challenges for pastoral leaders.
- Each Cristian is invited to lean more about HIV and AIDS, to not be judgmental, show concern, pray for cure, through education help prevention.
- "HIV/AIDS is a human disease it is not a god's wrath!"

3. Round of exchanges among participants on their experience on HIV/AIDS pandemic in their countries and HIV/AIDS related Caritas activities:

- Discussion on prevention in the represented countries and involvement of catholic and other Christian churches in the discussions on HIV/AIDS in general and prevention issues in particular. In most of the cases the Churches are reluctant to talk about prevention measures openly.
- Caritas Lithuania is not directly involved in this area, but since they are active in the work with prisoners, which are one of the highest risk groups, organization needs to be informed and be aware of the current issues. They also feel that Church needs to be more actively involved in Lithuania in the work that Caritas does. Have more active input in prevention and pastoral care.
- Caritas Malta has already been in touch with Fr. Vitillo to have advice on starting up their involved in this area. In Malta this issue is a reason for stigma. People take up treatments in other countries to avoid stigmatization. This creates challenges in creating and delivering support services. Reluctance of local church to engage itself in discussion also puts obstacles in dealing with HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases
- In Norwegian Public as well there is a stereotype of churches' response to this issue. Caritas Norway would like to invite Fr, Vitillo for an assessment trip in Norway and also with the an aim of awareness rising among local clergy.
- In the Netherlands, according to information from CORDAID, the issue is dealt with by government and there are not many gaps to be filled by CORDAID or other NGOs. At the same time state criticizes Catholic Church, as they deal with the infected population but avoid talks on effective methods of prevention.

- There are numerous challenges related to HIV/AIDS in Ukraine as well. The whole society is affected by an increasing number of problems, social and economic. From the local Church side, there is a readiness to talk about this issue. There even was a pastoral letter of the Ukrainian Catholic Church to emphasize the importance of the pandemic and express its commitment for active participation in civil dialogue. Caritas Ukraine is represented at the national committee of HIV/AIDS on the level of the Ukrainian Government. They also implement various field activities and projects for HIV/AIDS orphans, lobbying and advocacy on national level. Caritas Ukraine believes that the right approach would be to start educating priests on parish levels, raising their awareness and train them for proper approaches to infected people. All of them could be effective agents for awareness rising and fighting exclusion of infected people from the society.

The group agreed on the importance of removing HIV/AIDS stigma that leads to drastic social exclusion in our societies. It is important to actively involve religious leaders in discussions and activities. Their participation in education of the society, parishes, and in pastoral care of the infected people would be an important input. It is also important to avoid condom paralysis and condom fixation, realizing that just by spreading around the condoms, we will not tackle the root causes of the problem. We as a church should stand together to promote our values with regards to sexuality, faithfulness and monogamy.

As a network Caritas Europa should promote and facilitate building of bilateral or multilateral partnerships between its member organizations. The first step has already been made to establish a regular working structure of Caritas Europa to share information and find possibilities and areas for cooperation.

During planning and/or implementing our activities for HIV/AIDS prevention or care for infected people, we should keep in mind to include them in our activities; this would go hand in hand with Caritas Europa's value of working with poor and not for poor.