

Introduction

Albert Einstein once said that the unleashed power of the atom had changed everything except our ways of thinking. The same may be true in human relationships after the outbreak of Aids. While there is some panic over the new threat to health, much current sexual behaviour in the Southern Region of Africa remains unchanged. Governments as well as non-governmental organisations spend millions of dollars on advertising and information campaigns, yet the number of newly infected is soaring. Many of us feel that we still do not know the answers to the questions raised by Aids. We are bewildered, for example, by such questions like: In what way will it affect us personally? What are we to think about the disease and those who have it? How does our Christianity influence what we think? And what should we do? AIDS has also presented a set of specific questions to the Catholic Church. Should the Church keep on holding to the view that each conjugal act must be open for procreation? Should the sexual encounter between firmly promised fiancées be placed on the same level with promiscuity or prostitution? AIDS challenges our moral theology, our educational systems, our ministry to the sick and the dying as well as our expectations of the clergy. This paper attempts not to answer all the questions raised by Aids but to offer part of the Christian response to the reality of AIDS. In clarifying the nature of our pastoral response, I hope to make a contribution to the wider debate in society. At the centre of this paper, I hope you will meet the AIDS patient himself / herself with his / her needs and his / her challenge to the Church And at the heart of it also. I hope you will find an imitation to wade across the threshold into the lives of people with AIDS and to invite them across our threshold. Only when we have clarified the issues for ourselves, when the myths and fears have faded, when we feel confident and fully informed, can we be able to take those steps. Good pastoral work is inseparable from good theology. The abbreviation AIDS, is the acronym for Acquired (as opposed to inherited) Immune Deficiency Syndrome. The reason why AIDS is called a ..syndrome" is because it is not one disease but rather a combination of diseases. This syndrome is caused by a virus that destroys a person's defenses against infections. These defenses are known as the immune system. According to Gerald D. Coleman in his book Human Sexuality. "The HIV / AIDS infection known as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (sometimes referred to as the HTLV-III / LAV Virus) can also weaken a person's immune system that he or she cannot fight off even mild infections and cancers". As regards its origin, no theory is yet conclusive so I reserve that to experts.