



# World AIDS Day message 2009



## Stop AIDS

### Keep the promise: Universal Access and Human Rights

The theme for The World AIDS Day (Dec 1), each year, is chosen after extensive consultation by many global health organizations including WHO and UNAIDS. For each World AIDS day from 2005 to 2010, the theme chosen is "stop AIDS; keep the promise" with a yearly subtheme. Thus, the theme for this year (2009) is "Stop AIDS; keep the promise: Universal Access and Human Rights".

***Is it possible?*** to stop AIDS; to keep the promise; to provide universal access to those who are infected with the virus; and to respect the human rights of those affected and suffering from HIV? For most of the common people, HIV (the infection) and AIDS (the syndrome/sickness) are the same. Most of them do not understand that an HIV infected person, can be assisted, in preventing the infection progressing into its final stage - AIDS, and can live a normal life. In such a situation, it is difficult to believe that AIDS CAN be stopped!

***ART, the great contribution:*** Ever since HIV became a problem, there had been efforts to stop it from becoming a threat to humanity. So many individuals, groups, organizations, and countries have contributed to this effort. One of the greatest contributions of science and technology to humanity is ART (Anti Retroviral Therapy) that prevents HIV infection from progressing into AIDS. Today with the availability of ART, it IS possible to stop HIV infection progressing into AIDS, and prevent unnecessary, suffering and premature death. With the incorporation of ART into the national programs, and availability of drugs through the ART centers, free of cost, universal access has become a possibility!

***Universal access:*** But how do we ensure that these contributions of science, technology and national programs, result in universal access? That every HIV infected child, mother, and adult have access to ART? One of the important ways is by rediscovering the principles of Primary Health Care (PHC). PHC is essential health care, accessible for all, at a cost they can afford. One of the 4 principles of PHC is equitable distribution - "commitment to health equity as part of development, oriented to social justice". That is the key to universal access. That is where all have to keep their promises! The pharmaceutical industries need to make ART available at affordable prices; the politicians have to work towards good governance that strengthens the primary health care systems of the country. The NGOs, CBOs, FBOs, the corporate sector, the peoples' movements, and the other civil society initiatives, need to rise above their own little world and work together, towards strengthening the National programs, and by standing for the people.

**Catholic social teachings and 'distributive justice:** Distributive justice is very much part of the catholic social teachings. Much before the primary health Care declaration at Alma Ata (Sept. 12, 1978), Catholic Church spoke about social justice and equitable distribution (distributive justice), through its encyclical, 'Rerum Novarum' by Pope Leo XIII (May 15, 1891) "Among the many and grave duties of rulers who would do their best for the people, the first and chief is to act with strict justice- with that which is justice called distributive - toward each and every class alike" (RN, 33).

The social teaching of the Church is translated into action in the field of health care through its vast health care network in the country, which is the 2nd largest, next to the government of India. Of the 5500 plus health care institutions of the catholic church in India, about 80% of them are small clinics in the remote parts of the country, contributing to primary health care, through its committed work force, mostly religious sisters. These clinics can very much be part of the national program, to ensure universal access.

**Indian Church and HIV/AIDS:** The Catholic Church in India had been involved in the field of HIV/AIDS ever since it became a problem in India. This involvement had been in the areas of prevention, care, and rehabilitative services through its vast network of NGOs, CBOs, and other institutions; for example, the various congregations like the Camillians, other congregations run by religious sisters, CHAI, diocesan social service societies, Caritas India Network, Sister Doctors, Catholic Nurses Guild, CRS, CMMB, St. John's Medical College, and so on. The effort to bring together many of the above mentioned networks as a coalition for HIV/AIDS became concretized with the registration of this coalition into a separate society, CBCI CARD (CBCI Coalition for Aids and Related Diseases).

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), through its health commission, had been involved in the PACT project (Promoting Access to Care and Treatment) sponsored by the Global Fund since June, 2007. This is being done as a concrete expression and example of the CBCI policy on HIV/AIDS – "Commitment to Compassion and Care". Under the PACT project CBCI has been able to set up 44 Community Care Centers (CCC) in five states - Gujarat, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. A total of 18,381 People Living with HIV (PLHIV) have been enrolled and accessed services from these CCCs till August 2009. These CCCs have been assisting the ART centers, for providing short term care, counseling, and ensuring drug adherence of the PLHIV, who were started on treatment. Moreover, 97 PLHIV is working with us as project staff. Their presence in the project is truly inspirational for their peers, who discover hope, in the midst of discrimination and suffering!

**Conclusion:** On this world AIDS day, in solidarity with all other organizations, the Catholic Church in India, 'in the footsteps of Jesus the divine healer', will continue its 'commitment to compassion and care for those afflicted by HIV/AIDS, to stop AIDS; to keep the promise; to bring forth universal access and to work towards the promotion of the human rights of every citizen of India, living with HIV/AIDS, especially the poor and the marginalized!

December 1, 2009

**Archbishop Bernard Moras, Chairman, CBCI Health Commission**

