MESSAGE FROM THE CATHOLIC HEALTH COMMISSION

GETTING TO ZERO: Let there be zero new HIV Infections-zero HIV/AIDS related deaths-zero stigma and discrimination

1. Preamble

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, receive our greetings as the Church begins a new Liturgical Year, a journey of faith that, on one hand prepares us for Christmas and, on the other hand, directs our minds and hearts to Christ’s Second Coming. Today we also join the rest of the world to commemorate the World AIDS Day, which is observed annually on 1st December. The World AIDS Day is an important occasion when governments, national AIDS programs, faith and community organizations, and individuals around the world bring their attention to the global AIDS pandemic. This message aims at inviting all the Catholic faithful to join hands in emphasizing the critical need for a committed, meaningful and sustained response to the pandemic.

2. Getting to Zero

World AIDS Day commemoration provides us with precious moments to reflect on the continuing prevalence of HIV and AIDS in our midst. The World AIDS Day Campaign has selected the global theme for 2011 to 2015, as “GETTING TO ZERO.” This was guided by the United Nations’ “Getting to Zero” campaign which is focusing on the goals of zero new infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS related deaths. Our faith teaches us that all people are created in God’s own image (Gen.1: 27). While we work to promote and protect the rights of people living with or affected by HIV, or those who are vulnerable to the infection, we are called to consider reaching this goal, following the footsteps of Jesus Christ who was compassionate. We continue caring for the infected and affected with charity, while ensuring that those who are not yet infected remain in the same status.

2.1. Why focus on getting to zero

The HIV/AIDS situation in Malawi is showing some progress, and this is what gives us hope and courage that we can achieve this goal of getting to zero.

- Already, reports show that there has been a remarkable achievement in that new infections have declined by 38% between 2007 and 2010; there is a reduction in the new adult infections by 50%; and adult prevalence rate has reduced from 11.8% in 2004 to 10.6% in 2010.

- Close to 4 million people have had their blood tested for HIV since the country has about 569 health facilities offering HIV Testing and Counseling services.

- The total number of people who started receiving ante-retroviral therapy is over 505,055 and 369,436 of them are still alive and on treatment and the estimated annual number of AIDS deaths declined by 20% between 2007 and 2010.
However, despite such remarkable achievements, the impact of HIV and AIDS remains devastating and the country’s efforts seem inadequate given the magnitude of the problem:

- HIV and AIDS remains the leading cause of death in the most productive age group, with a mortality rate close to 700 deaths per 100,000 people.
- Out of Malawi’s one million orphans, 500,000 have lost one or both of their parents to AIDS and a fifth of all households in Malawi take care of one or more orphans.
- There are still quite a high number of people living with HIV that have no access to free antiretroviral therapy. With the current shortage of drugs in our hospitals, many of these including those on ART cannot access drugs for treatment of opportunistic infections.
- Cases of abuse, stigma and discrimination of the affected and infected are still on the high in our society. In fact, there are still reports about grabbing of property that belong to widows and orphans, and of chiefs refusing to register for coupons those that are living positively with HIV.

It is also noteworthy that some of the cases of discrimination occur in the Church:

- One may not be elected to a certain position because he or she is HIV positive.
- Issues of unfaithfulness among married couples and youth indulging in premarital sex are also reported to be on the increase among Christians, fueled by the influx of foreign cultures learned through the media.

Failure to respond to these challenges can be perceived as negligence of our Christian duty to prophetically reach out, in compassion and solidarity, to all the sick members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). Christians are called to advocate for the rights of the vulnerable. As St Paul writes to the Romans, “the time has come: you must wake up now... let us give up all things we prefer to do under cover of the dark. Let us arm ourselves and appear in the light.”(Romans 13:1ff).

2.2. We can make a difference

The World AIDS Day Campaign theme of “GETTING TO ZERO challenges us to consider that new HIV infections can be stopped. For this to be realized, it means that Malawi must reach a state whereby fewer people are newly infected than are newly placed on treatment; those infected are well taken care of; and that none of them dies due to treatable diseases. Malawi out to reach a situation where those infected and affected are respected in the society just like any other individual.

2.2.1. Zero new HIV infections

As we reflect on this year’s theme, we call upon:

- Couples of childbearing age to ensure that they get tested for HIV before falling pregnant so that they get proper guidance and counselling pertaining to prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV. Remember that a stitch in time saves nine.
- Parents, guardians and all who are responsible for the youth to give them proper orientation in life so that they are not carried away by peer pressure as they grow.
- The youth to refrain from indulging into premarital sex for sex outside marriage is sinful and can harm our life and health.
• Custodians of culture to condemn and admonish negative cultural practices that put people at risk of HIV infection.

2.2.2. Zero HIV/AIDS related deaths

While access to ART is vital for all people who have tested positive for HIV, access to essential drugs is also vital - so is access to balanced food, clean water and other basic necessities essential for human life as God intended it. Therefore, while efforts of providing ARVs are making a good progress in our country, we cannot deny the fact that one right cannot be fully achieved without the other.

• People living with HIV have a greater need for essential drugs than others. The current shortage of drugs in our hospitals is putting at risk more especially people living with HIV as they are prone to various illnesses due to the lowered immunity.

• Food security has a particular significance for People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHAs). An adequate diet can help them (PLWHAs) stay healthy and reduce their vulnerability to AIDS-related diseases. Without adequate food, an individual’s response to ARVs can be undermined; the frequency of opportunistic infections increases; and the progression of AIDS-related illnesses hasten leading to unnecessary deaths.

We, therefore call upon Catholic health workers as well as partners in the fight against HIV/AIDS to ensure more comprehensive and integrated approaches to addressing both HIV, opportunistic infections and stemming hunger. For us, this will be a special response to Jesus’ invitation for compassion towards the most vulnerable. “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and gave me drink ....ill and you cared for me.... ” (Mt 25:35ff).

2.2.3. Zero discrimination

HIV-related stigma and discrimination has accompanied the AIDS epidemic from the start. Fear of and actual experience with stigma and discrimination reduces an individual’s willingness to practice prevention; to seek HIV testing; to disclose his or her HIV status to others; to ask for (or give) care and support; to begin and adhere to treatment. The possible consequences of HIV-related stigma may include loss of income/livelihood, loss of marriage, poor care within the health sector, withdrawal of care giving in the home, loss of hope and feelings of worthlessness and loss of reputation.

We call upon all Christians and people of goodwill to promote and protect the human rights of people living with or affected by HIV, or those who are vulnerable to the infection. Christian charity calls us to work for justice and to treat everybody with compassion and love.

3. Conclusion

We hail Christ the Prince of Peace and the King of Justice (Is 9:5-6). He comes to bring good tidings to the poor, the disadvantaged: food to the hungry, sight to the blind, defence to the weak and powerless, and healing to the sick. Christ brings us hope and new life: people who were in darkness will see a great light (Is 9:1). If we genuinely love our colleagues who are infected or affected, we would not discriminate them in any way but rather work hard to ensure that they live positively and that none of them dies of treatable conditions. We shall not sit by and watch when the life our brother or sister is at risk.
Zero new HIV infections - Zero HIV related deaths - Zero discrimination

1st December 2013