

Monday, December 1 – World AIDS Day

Susan Weissert, MKLM, Maryknoll AIDS Task Force, Maryknoll, NY

- Isaiah 2:1-5 They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.
- Psalms 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9 May peace be within your ramparts, prosperity within your towers ... "May peace be yours."
- Matthew 8:5-11 Jesus heals the centurion's servant

This year marks 20 years of commemorating World AIDS Day, 27 years into the global AIDS pandemic. Billions of dollars have been committed for research, programs and medicines, and multitudinous efforts made to change behaviors and lower the transmission. Where are we as people of faith? How do we continue, and what do we do that marks our faith as the driver of our efforts?

The Scripture readings around World AIDS Day speak to us of leadership and point us to the possibilities for turning swords into plowshares. Matthew tells us the story of the centurion who steps out of his position of power to ask Jesus to cure his servant. This story crosses lines of culture, ethnicity and power, and its main characters are social "outsiders": the centurion, who represented the occupying power in Jerusalem; Jesus, Jewish prophet, who consistently stood by the poor rather than by the traditions; and the servant boy (servants and slaves held no social rank in that society).

Reminiscent of the Isaiah reading (swords to plowshares), the centurion turned his powerful position into an advocate's position and humbled himself before a person he could legally oppress, clearly with the faith that his request would be fulfilled if he was willing to take the risk. His plea for healing was not for a family member or another person of military rank, but rather, for a person who has no standing at all in his household: a servant. His appeal, in that day and age, was out of place and out of tradition, a sign of his commitment to everyone in his household.

The centurion shows us an aspect of leadership that is crucial in our fight against AIDS. He assumed the responsibility that comes with power, by asking for his servant to be healed. In saying "I too, am a man subject to authority," he acknowledges the authority with which this Jew, Jesus, preaches and heals. How extraordinary for those times!

What is the parallel for our time? Who are we in these readings?

HIV and AIDS highlight all of the places where the "outsiders" live with injustice, paralyzed socially and economically by stigma and lack of access to services and medicines. And our societies are paralyzed and in "terrible distress" as well, as long as people do not have enough nutrition to keep their bodies healthy, for whom national foreign debt restricts access to education and health services; for whom trade agreements mean lack of medicine and who have no voice in the decisions that affect their lives. We are in moral paralysis and spiritual distress. Who will speak for our sisters and brothers who live with HIV and AIDS, for the children who are orphaned? Who will ask for them to be healed?

The world's leaders have signed major United Nations documents which commit them to enacting national strategies and legislating funds for the prevention, care and treatment of HIV and AIDS, as well as programs for orphans and vulnerable children. They have also endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, of which the sixth is specific to HIV and AIDS. These leaders have taken responsibility for the people of their countries. We are called to approach our leaders, whoever they may be, and demand that these commitments be honored. With the authority that governments carry comes the responsibility to go beyond signing documents to speaking out for the poor, the "least of these," in our countries ... in all of our countries. As the centurion risked his military and social reputation by speaking with the Jewish healer for a servant, we can do no less: we must speak out, move our leaders and form policy and action.

In addition, the centurion crossed cultural boundaries with respect and good sense. Jesus, as a Jew, would be defiled in his culture if he entered the home of a Gentile. Therefore, the centurion did not ask him to his house, but told him that his word would be enough. Our work with leaders and policy must take into respect the cultures with which we propose policies and programs. This pandemic will not be controlled if authority is misused, if peoples' cultures and traditions are not taken into account.

And, at the end of the story, Jesus, after marveling at the amazing faith and humility of this man, says, "Many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... in the Kingdom of heaven." For Jesus, there was never an issue of status, ethnicity, culture or power. All people will have access to the "Kingdom." It is so often said that the HIV virus knows no boundaries: race, gender, religion, economic status, addictions, sexual orientation. As the virus knows no boundaries, so should our efforts and those of our leaders know no boundaries. Our commitment is to all persons, "from the east and the west," servants and centurions alike, and it is past time to demand that our leaders keep their promises. And we need to keep ours as well.

For more information: Keep the promise around the U.S.'s commitment to halt the spread of HIV and AIDS and other treatable diseases. Engage newly elected officials. Challenge them to work towards the important policy goals outlined in Maryknoll's "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encouraged voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: *Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation*
P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. 20017
phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195
ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org