

Vatican conference gives hope in fight against AIDS

by Jonathan Tennenbaum

On Nov. 13-15 the Catholic Church brought together many of the world's leading medical researchers, doctors, and scholars from many fields of humanistic studies, to present the latest state of knowledge on AIDS and to discuss mankind's strategy against the pandemic. In three intensive days of presentations, held in the Synod Hall in Vatican City, Rome, a relatively hopeful perspective emerged: Medical science is learning how to treat AIDS-infected persons, to prolong their healthy lives, and perhaps eventually to prevent them from becoming sick.

There is progress, too, in the development of a vaccine to protect against infection, as the result of an intensive international research effort. Many speakers expressed hope that mankind's terrifying confrontation with the "plague of the late 20th century" will reverse the moral degeneration of recent decades, and bring on a return to the "true form of human sexuality, in accordance with the biology and the spiritual nature of man."

While the most crucial practical issue in the fight against AIDS was barely mentioned at the conference—the necessity for an economic mobilization to save Africa and other hard-hit areas of the world from virtual depopulation, by improving living conditions and rebuilding the health care systems—it is to be hoped that the conference's emphasis on morality will be reflected in a change here, too. Without a change of economic policy, even the best medical remedies will be inadequate. The collapse of health care systems in many parts of the world, including the United States, will otherwise make it impossible to administer the complex and expensive treatments now being developed.

'Pathology of the spirit'

Speaking in the last session of the conference, Pope John Paul II condemned what he called "a real pathology of the spirit" which had developed parallel to the spread of AIDS. He called for "the teaching of the sharing of love, of charity" to give young people the strength to resist the moral corruption which has seized many of our societies. As he and many speakers emphasized, the problems posed by AIDS can only be solved when a mobilization of medical science is coupled

with a moral renaissance, a renewed commitment to the principle of the sacredness and dignity of every human life.

The Pope condemned the so-called "safe sex" campaign, centered around promotion of the use of condoms to protect against human immuno-deficiency virus HIV infection, saying that "it is morally illegal to propose a form of AIDS prevention based on means and remedies that violate the true human sense of sexuality."

Many speakers emphasized, that the disastrous speed and scale of the spread of AIDS would have been impossible without the cultural degeneration of recent decades, particularly the banalization of sexual relations and dramatic rise of sexual promiscuity and perversion in many parts of the world. The rise of "sex tourism" which helped to disseminate AIDS rapidly on every continent of the globe, is a particularly dangerous manifestation of this cultural depravity. The disruption of traditional social and family structures in Africa and elsewhere over the last 10-20 years has been disastrous.

Not only does the "safe sex" campaign condone this cultural degeneration, but it propagates the false impression that condoms provide absolute protection against infection. Thus, "safer sex" is actually contributing to the spread of AIDS infection.

The second major message of the conference was that much can be done to prolong the lives of persons infected with AIDS, if the infection is detected early. The French virologist Luc Montagnier, whose group was the first to identify the AIDS virus, declared at the conference that "Antiviral therapies have shown themselves most effective if given before the infected person becomes sick, while the immunological defenses still exist. That is why I would like to propose that we treat, in general, all seropositive persons, all infected persons. Of course, we do not have the ideal treatment yet. We do not know what the best combination is, of antiviral drugs with low toxicity, capable of being taken over a long period, together with treatments designed to augment the immunological resistance of the organism. But it is clear that we already have in our hands effective substances.

"Taking under consideration all the rules of ethics and scientific practice, we could include all seropositive persons

in the clinical trials, comparing the various combinations of treatments. In my opinion this phase of intensive trials could lead, in a reasonable period of time, to development of a treatment for infected persons which would prevent them from becoming sick. Later, by use of vaccines and drugs to reinforce the immune system, one could, if not completely eliminate the infection, then at least render it totally harmless and imperceptible for the patient." Montagnier stressed that while this work goes forward, and while he is optimistic about the final outcome, it is necessary to do the utmost now to slow the further spread of infection.

Importance of early detection

Montagnier's call for early detection and treatment of AIDS virus infection was supported by Dr. Robert Redfield, Chief of the Retrovirus Research Department at the U.S. Army's Walter Reed Institute, and the man who has directed the mass testing of all new recruits to the U.S. Armed Forces. Redfield stated: "I have come here with a very simple message. Early diagnosis of HIV infection is good. It gives people an opportunity to receive medical care based on knowledge, to review their personal priorities, to prevent opportunistic infections such as tuberculosis, to have the AIDS disease itself delayed. And however limited the medical resources of our institutions or countries, most importantly it gives one the opportunity to avoid unknowingly transmitting infection to one's loved ones."

Redfield noted that early detection of cancer was recognized to be crucial to the life expectancy of a patient, and yet "unfortunately some people in the medical community and in society at large have been slow to recognize the same importance in reference to HIV infection. They say AIDS is different. But, is it really? As a physician, I think not. HIV infection is treatable and preventable. But our ability to treat is dependent on knowledge of infection on a personal level, institutional level and as a society. The [U.S.] military has tried to do the right thing, to embrace the principles of medicine and public health and crisis prevention, independent of the fear of what might be found and the excuses about why nothing can be done. Each day I pray for those who have been denied an early diagnosis, denied the medical treatment which would have been provided, denied the opportunity not to infect another person."

The presentations by Montagnier and Redfield demonstrated the absurd position of those who argue against universal AIDS testing of the population on the grounds that it would endanger the "human rights" of infected persons. For, it is exactly the infected persons, who otherwise would not know of their infection, who would gain the most through early detection of their condition.

Race to a vaccine

The conference included detailed presentations on the race to develop a vaccine against AIDS, which is a formida-

ble challenge given the AIDS virus's unique ability to "hide" itself within cells, and to rapidly evolve new strains. The main idea is to focus on those aspects of the AIDS virus which do not change and which the virus absolutely needs in order to reproduce itself, and to target not only the virus particles themselves, but also the cells which harbor the virus.

The most spectacular presentation was by the French researcher Daniel Zagury, who is using himself as an experi-

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mental subject ("guinea pig") in vaccine studies. After repeated inoculation with an experimental vaccine, the "subject DZ" developed a powerful immune response, as shown by the fact that his blood is able to kill the AIDS virus, as well as infected cells, in the test tube.

Whether the vaccine provides real protection against infection by AIDS has yet to be proven. At the very least, tremendous additional work to perfect the vaccine, plus clinical trials, will be needed before a final judgment can be reached. Opinions differed strongly among various speakers on this subject, as to how many years it would take before large numbers of people could be protected by vaccination, but there was overall optimism that the development of a vaccine is in fact possible.

Concerning the application of vaccines and antiviral drugs, there is a notable convergence of scientific and moral necessity: Unless these are employed in a total assault against the virus *everywhere* at the same time, there is a great danger that *resistant strains* will appear. This problem is well known in the control of insects and various diseases, and it is particularly acute in the case of the rapidly evolving AIDS virus. Already, AIDS virus strains have appeared which are resistant to the best treatment drug found so far, AZT. If Africa, for example, were to be deprived of full use of anti-AIDS drugs and vaccines, then Africa would become a reservoir for the continual emergence of new strains, which would threaten the rest of the world.

Professor Montagnier put the matter in the following way: "The world is one. It is not acceptable to just be able to treat a few individuals who have economic and material means. It is clear that one cannot treat this disease in one part of the world and let it run wild in other parts of the globe. We must face this problem all together."