



## WORLD AIDS DAY 2007

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

*I received the following letter from Fr. Mike Perry, OFM, a Franciscan priest friend of mine who has been working with on the HIV/AIDS pandemic for a number of years. His compassion and understanding of the HIV/AIDS crisis mirrors mine.*

*Sr. Sheila Kinsey, OSF*

As we prepare to commemorate WORLD AIDS DAY 2007 on December 1, we recall with hope and commitment the more than 27 million brothers and sisters, young and old who have died since HIV and AIDS were 'discovered' in 1981. Each day in 2007, more than 6,800 people—more women than men, more youth than elderly—were newly infected.

While access to life-extending drugs has been extended to over 2.5 million people, this represents only a small percent of all in need of anti-retroviral therapy. As people live longer with the virus, they require new and more powerful drugs to treat resistance strains of the virus. The increased costs of drugs make treatment unaffordable for some and unimaginable for others. Children living with HIV who now number over 2.5 million are still among the most neglected, as they lack access to life-saving drugs. Meanwhile, HIV infections continue to rise at an alarming rate in African American and Latino communities in the U.S. and also in Eastern Europe.

Governmental entities along with the political will of committed donors together with an increase in funding contribute to a greater level of awareness about the causes and effects of the crisis of HIV and AIDS. However, controversy remains as to how best to prevent new infections—behavior change, use of prophylactics, empowerment of women and girls through education, job creation and more. In developing nations, broader domestic issues concerning women and children are helping to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS. Specifically, the matter of women gaining the right to inherit property, expansion of drugs to prevent Mother-to-Child-Transmission, de-stigmatization, greater involvement of People Living with HIV in the design of prevention strategies and needle exchange programs for intravenous drug users; these are but some of the moral and political challenges to prevention.

Greater support must be given or efforts to combat poverty and promote education as critical tools in the fight against the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Greater access to life-extending drugs must become universal, as it is in Brazil, so that all who live with HIV might be provided an opportunity to return to healthy and productive lives, caring for their children and contributing to their communities. And every effort must be made to 'mainstream' HIV and AIDS, removing the stigma and moral judgments from the

pandemic so that we might recognize one another as people of dignity, citizens of the Kingdom of God and vital members of the human community.

What is becoming ever clearer: we as Christians have a moral responsibility to join with others in fighting the HIV and AIDS pandemic. There are a number of simple - yet effective - ways we might consider to demonstrate our solidarity with all living with or affected by HIV and AIDS.

For priests and ministers, preaching is an effective way to communicate human dignity and the challenges of justice and charity as we open our hearts, hands and communities to all people. The Word of God and Eucharist have everything to do with HIV and AIDS because it is in the Eucharist that 'all are one in Christ' - all! Daily prayer could include a moment to remember those living with and affected by HIV, especially children and young girls who increasingly are becoming heads of households, orphaned parents because of HIV and AIDS.

For those working in educational institutions, it might be worthwhile considering including a teaching unit on HIV and AIDS, focusing on the medical/scientific aspects as well as on the cultural and social consequences. And for those who think they are too old to be able to do much, remember that new HIV infections in the US and elsewhere include those who are 'golden-agers'-. No one is spared from the reach of HIV. Perhaps we could include prayers for the senior members of our world who, through loneliness or for other reasons, are particularly vulnerable to acquiring the virus.

Finally, we can bring our voices, and those of our partners and friends in ministry, to the political 'table', calling on our government and the international community to provide greater funding to fight all aspects of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. We can call upon such drug giants at Abbot Laboratories, Pfizer and other companies to continue to research new treatment programs and drugs, and to do so at a cost that is accessible to the poorest of our world.

These are but a few of the many activities we might consider as we commemorate World Aids Day 2007. For more information on Christian responses to HIV and AIDS, and for more information on the HIV and AIDS pandemic, visit the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance website ( [www.e-alliance.ch](http://www.e-alliance.ch) and [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org) ). Let us also remember that the Catholic Church continues to care for as much as 25% of all who are living with HIV and AIDS worldwide.

Included with this message is a Franciscan Prayer for Aids Day 2007 based on the more recent traditional Peace Prayer of St. Francis. Please make use of this prayer throughout the month of December. Share it with others in your ministries and local communities. Let us remember that AIDS DAY is more than just a day - it is an invitation to undertake a new vision of humanity when new infections will be eradicated and people living with HIV will be cared for in ways that inspire dignity and, unleash charity and restore humanity.