

HIV/AIDS in Africa: a Challenge to the Search for African-Christian Sexual Ethical Principles

Paul Chummar Chittilappilly

Introduction

Our age seems to be very rich in sexual matters: rape, heinous sex crimes, adultery, skyrocketing divorce rates, prostitution, paedophilia, abortion, pornography in its manifold forms and materials: blue movies, internet sex, pornographic compact disks, etc. Without sex T.V. programs are less attractive. Sex even powerfully affects the very stock exchange dax index in today's business world! The clever businesspeople know how to conduct a successful business, how to sell their products in the easiest and most profitable way through sex. Sexual appeal has become a business strategy, the sure means to maximum profit: sex appeal in fashion and in clothes, in advertisements, in internet shopping, in the media. Society adopts it unconsciously and lives with it as individuals, as groups and as organisations. Then it is said: "Sex is in!"

This article is an attempt to recall and to highlight some African and Christian principles of sexual morality in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It must be clearly stated that it should not be assumed that there is a great moral vacuum in the traditional understanding of sexuality in Africa compared to Christian morality: on the contrary, there is a rich, sound moral inheritance. But, like almost everywhere else in the world, there is also much moral confusion in the African continent since the Sexual Revolution of 1960s. So the task of the moment may be to remind people of their faded memories of their valuable and relevant sexual moral principles and reinforce them with universal Christian moral principles. This may achieve greater emphasis in the African context as Christianity gains increasing relevance in the continent. The task to face and eradicate the fatal AIDS pandemic does not come from a mandate outside Christianity, but by its very nature, from its founder, Jesus Christ. The task in the African continent may be to compliment and reinforce traditional sexual moral principles in an appropriate way with universal Christian moral principles as a solution in the fight against HIV/AIDS.¹

Arrival of Contraceptives and its Negative Effects

Sociologists date the beginning of the serious moral confusion that relates closely to the AIDS pandemic from the arrival of new contraceptives that enable women to regulate or even avoid pregnancy. Contraceptives have caused serious changes in the understanding of sexual morality and in the sexual behaviour of people throughout the world. On one hand contraceptives help both the partners avoid any kind of after effects, particularly, pregnancy. On other hand it liberalises them to engage in sexual activities with any sexual partners without marriage or without any kind of life-long obligations to one another. So the pill ensures and increases the possibility of sexual activity without any risk! The effectiveness of new contraceptive methods also enables sex to be regarded as an act "just for fun" without considering its procreative role. According to this maxim more sexual activities means more fun. As a consequence self-control is reduced in the urge for sexual gratification. At the same time it diminishes the original understanding of sexuality as a deep, intensive and exclusive

expression of the partnership relationship between a man and a woman. These new methods could seriously take away the important entities of sexuality, that is the expression of the exclusive love between a man and a woman and its purpose for procreation in the context of a married life.

If the whole of sexual orientation is directed solely towards self-satisfaction the understanding of an intimate sexual relationship between two autonomous persons, not bound to one another and free to dissolve their relationship at any time, as temporary, endangers the sociological aspect of the 'we' of husband and wife and their life-long and inseparable partnership in love. Sexual activity then becomes like a customary sex-business relationship. Human sexuality becomes an exchangeable good in the play between a man and a woman! In other words a laissez-faire affair destabilises the protective character of the relationship between a man and a woman. Sexuality, which once contributed to the stability of a relationship and partnership between a man and a woman, is changed into a factor of instability between both of them. The traditional concept of sexuality as a powerful, exclusive, intimate, physical and psychological expression of love is now degraded into an object! In certain cases a partner is selected on the basis of the sexiness of their appearance. The authentic human relationship between a man and a woman, which is to be steered by the principles of real love, dedication, sacrifice, trust, and renunciation for one another for the sake of the stability of the partnership is then replaced by mere feeling for one another. And when there is no feeling left, then there would not be a deep relationship! The dignity of the person is increasingly and unconsciously degraded!

In short: the use of technical-pharmaceutical contraceptives causes a destabilisation and breakdown of relationships. It makes it possible to deprive a partnership of exclusiveness and, at the same time, allows the possibility of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships without any contraceptive risks.² On the other hand sexual relationships between unmarried persons are often seen as test acts. Common jargon proves this new way of thinking. "Love without sex is like chai (= tea) without sugar!" "You cannot buy a commodity without first unwrapping it!" "You cannot buy groundnuts without first tasting them!" Or regarding extra-marital sex they say: "A fool thinks that his wife's dishes are the most delicious and you will not know that your wife's dishes are not the best until you taste others outside!" And even if you seriously warn them of the dreadful danger of HIV/AIDS they laugh at you and argue about the reliability of the latex or rubber solution of condoms! "A cow chews grass and cuds till it dies with them in its mouth!"

Since contraception blocks the beginning of a new life, of an offspring, the sexual union between man and woman is without its procreative goal, which is important in African sexual morality. A new born baby is fully dependent on its parents, mother and father, from the very beginning for its physiological, psychological and sociological needs. In its turn it binds its father and mother together more closely and silently reminds them both that they have to live together and work for the sake of the child. The absence of an offspring leaves a goal vacuum and does not help create a strong bond between a man and a woman.

Further, the propagation and implementation of contraceptives as safe sex methods destabilises traditional and healthy sexual moral principles since they can be used with any one, and not necessarily only in a married partnership. It is also to be noted that in the fight against AIDS by means of safe sex condoms are propagated as a means to "protect yourself". But practically nothing is heard about the increased possibility and practice of promiscuity, which is one of the most serious reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Though the government and non-governmental agencies propagate an AIDS-free-country or continent, their actions suggest they are resigned to the dying moral principles of

society. Often the preventive message works as a contradictory message: “Use condoms and do what you want to do!”³ Could the silence as regards moral principles be because of the current moral confusion? There is scarcely any interest in discussing the issue of AIDS from the ethical point of view though it touches almost all dimensions of human behaviour. It is treated as a taboo theme. But as long as all the energy is concentrated solely on the fight against the ways of infection and not with the real causes of a fatal behaviour how do we eradicate the fatal pandemic! We are caught up in a vicious circle. In spite of intensified advertisements against HIV/AIDS, the pandemic is increasing rapidly and compels us to rethink our strategies.⁴

The prevailing deep silence with regard to sexual principles in society seriously affects the younger generation. Whereas in former times parents or elderly persons gave sexual moral education to the younger generation, and certain cultural practices supported the teachings on how to retain moral integrity, today there is an increasing silence. At the same time it must also be said that what has crept into the world of adults is now also accessible to the younger generation without much censure. To a great extent they copy the promiscuous behaviour of their elders and believe that the whole purpose of sexuality is only for genital satisfaction and pleasure. According to UNAIDS studies the age at which the young generation have their first sexual experience is becoming considerably and astonishingly lower than in former times.⁵ Whereas parents and other responsible persons in a society encourage the younger generation to live more and more efficient, productive, rich lives with excellent academic qualifications, education for a morally good life is more and more neglected. Often the media or their peers act as their educators, which damages their moral integrity rather than builds it up.

When we summarise the impact of new technical–pharmaceutical contraception since its arrival to help prevent unwanted after-effects of sexual activity, we notice that there is a considerable change in sexual behaviour: increased sexual contacts, increased number of sexual partners, an ease in which people live and experience intimate sexuality without any obligations to their partner, dropping out of the marriage bond and the life long promise to be faithful to the another partner, etc.

Propitious Ground for the Spread of HIV/AIDS

When these few observations are considered one can agree with the social findings M. D. Grmek that account for the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS: “Liberated from the yoke of behavioural expectations imposed by traditions of small village groups, the inhabitants of the big cities abandoned themselves heartily to elaborate sexual play. Urban prostitution, and still more the emergence of new categories of ‘free women’ and single men, promoted a multiplicity of partners. In such a new social situation the HIV virus found a propitious setting for its propagation.”⁶

The deviation from sound moral principles also causes the increasing number of abortions in the continent due to unwanted pregnancies.⁷ In short: the sexual gift endowed by God from the very beginning of humanity has become our main insoluble problem in the age of AIDS. As long as HIV/AIDS remains primarily a behavioural disease, there is no escaping the task of restoring morally correct behaviour along with the possibilities of medical treatment. Put simply: the war against AIDS will not be won solely by implementing the use of condoms.⁸ It is clear that moral appeals and warnings about the fatal nature of the virus have not penetrated deeply into the hearts of people since there is no noticeable decrease in the infection of the virus and death rates due to HIV/AIDS, but rather an increase in infections in many countries. “You don’t get AIDS, but you acquire AIDS”⁹ which is true in about 90% of cases. This deficiency is *acquired* mostly by wrong sexual behaviour. So the

task of the hour is to help people change their behaviour so that they can lead a sound and healthy life.

Though the churches exercise the role of the Good Samaritan to nurse the crestfallen humans, the task of defeating and healing the fatal structures with regard to AIDS remains for her! This can not be limited to occasional moral appeals! The process of conscientization is the challenge of today. This is much harder than moral appeals like: “Keep abstinence!” “Don’t use condoms” “Be faithful to your partner!”.... “AIDS prevention – to be worthy of the human person and at the same time truly effective – must propose two objectives: to inform adequately and to educate for responsibility,”¹⁰ says Pope John Paul II. In other words it is the task of education that each and every person in the continent understands that the gift of human sexuality given by God is to be lived in its full meaning with deep sense of responsibility: for the expression of love between married partners and for the pro-creative and co-creative goal. And the role of the sexual ethics is precisely this: to help the people to achieve this goal. When we critically analyse the history of ethics we see the fact that ethical principles are becoming more and more relevant and significant when all other solutions, such as technical-artificial ones, prove themselves less useful.

Diversity in Search of a Solution

It is necessary to do everything possible to save human lives which are attacked in a fatal way and decimate humanity in the most pathetic way. Everything possible should be done both to stop the further spread of infection and to cure the infected. With the rapid spread of the fatal infection, the appropriate scientific-technical solutions to stop the pandemic are to find vaccinations for the prevention of the HIV infection, and medical treatments for those already infected through drugs such as anti-retroviral treatments. At the same time questions must also be asked about the scientific-technical solutions: do these solutions, wrongly understood, bring new unsolvable problems for humanity? Will the present moral problems be over-observed by the new solutions? Are the new medical-technical solutions a further blank-cheque for sexual behaviour which would create a new chain of problems? Peter Piot, Executive Director of Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS warned seriously in his concluding words to the ICASA in Nairobi (International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa) on 26th September 2003: “I want to emphasise that Africa should not make the same mistake as the West did when ARVs became available. And that mistake was dropping the ball on prevention, based on the naïve belief that treatment would be enough to stop the epidemic.... The result was terrifying: an increase in infection! So, while we do everything we can to increase access to HIV treatment, we should equally scale up prevention efforts.”¹¹ Although the availability of new medical facilities have prolonged infected lives in the world of AIDS, the beginning of an eradication is not yet in sight. What could help us in this precarious situation?

A very powerful advertisement to fight against the AIDS is: “Stop AIDS. It begins with you!” But in spite of this direct command it is observed that it remains as an appeal! Though all possible means are undertaken such as through mass media, T.V., Radio, News paper, Posters, leaflets, the rate of infection goes up and up. The reasons are apparent first in human thinking patterns of humans, and then also in social and environmental customs and practices.

1. Personal Aspects of Sexuality

People do not like any outside interference in matters of sexuality. They claim that sexuality is the exclusive concern of each individual. It is said: “neither the government, nor the churches, nor the NGOs must interfere in people’s private lives. The way in which

sexuality is exercised is the exclusive concern of each individual person.” At the same time government, churches, NGOs, etc. are forced to take actions to alleviate the suffering that is due to this privatised sexual morality and morally wrong activity in order to save lives. Moreover, nobody can deny the intrinsic relationship that exists between human sexuality and marriage, and that any prudent society should uphold the moral principles. Therefore, though people have a certain exclusive right about whether to accept moral values, the duty of moral reawakening by higher authorities is unavoidable. This social dimension of education has greater emphasis in the African context since sexuality is also understood in its social dimension.

2. Responsibility

AIDS forces each and every individual to exercise sexuality with extreme responsibility. But very often people are not educated as to why they have to take responsibility, why sexual activities should be limited only to the legal partner whom they marry, and why marriage is the exclusive place for the sexual activities of husband and wife etc. And this moral confusion demands ethical-educational steps to sharpen the conscience of a person.

3. Well-formed Conscience

As HIV/AIDS is a health issue the infected persons are necessarily in consultation with medical professionals who have a serious obligation to inform their patients in detail about the status of their infection and also to inform them about all the possible modes of transmitting this fatal infection to others through his/her morally disordered behaviour. Only a well-formed conscience could enable an infected person to behave responsibly so that no further infection to other persons occurs. It is a question of ethics based on the Principle of a Well-Formed Conscience. To form true, responsible actions, in every free decision involving an ethical question, persons are morally obliged to do the following: to be informed as fully as practically possible about the facts of infection and its related ethical norms. Further, they have to form a morally certain judgment of conscience on the basis of this information. And their actions, especially the sexual activities should be then out of this well-formed conscience and they have to take the responsibility for their actions.

On other hand medical ethics sternly prohibits any kind of exchange of medical information to anyone other than the patient him/herself (Principle of Confidentiality). So they find themselves in a precarious situation. But medical professionals are the first and important people who are able support the infected person and help them during this time of fear to effect a behavioural change so that no more people are endangered by the infected person's actions. Of course this has to be done with much sensitivity and skill. They could, with the clear consent of the infected person, be a bridge to reveal the status of infection to the sexual partner. But it is doubtful whether they take this obligation seriously. So such silence around the infected status of a person without proper preventive methods means the sure spread of further infection to the his/her sexual partner.

4. Empowerment for a Personal Decision for a Morally Good Life

Sr. Kay Lawlor, a Medical Missionary of Mary, tells the story of how in 1988, while at a high school celebration in Uganda, she suggested an AIDS seminar for the new students. The headmistress surprised her, saying “I can’t listen to another talk on AIDS. You come here and tell us how it’s transmitted and how fast it’s spreading and each time the statistics get worse. No one is helping us to stop it.” This shocked Sr. Kay. Defensively she said: “It’s not possible to stop it if the people themselves won’t change their behaviour”. “Help them to do it then”, the headmistress retorted. Sr. Kay left with that statement ringing in her ears. The

seed had been sown. “Behaviour Change: The Education for Life Process” resulted. And it is to be acknowledged that this program has substantially contributed to a staggering reduction in the prevalence of AIDS in Uganda, from 28.9% at the height of the Epidemic to 9.8%, according to the UN figures. Young people were challenged to change their morally wrong behaviour by means of education, moral instructions, and above by means of strengthening them for self control.¹²

Responsible behaviour means more than not violating any rights of others and not endangering others’ life. Ethical principles cannot be fulfilled by negative concepts or moral prohibitions alone. A lifestyle full of prohibitions and negative instructions will be not be accepted as the experience of Sr. Kay of Uganda shows. Nor can it be limited only to the maxim: “Be kind to others” and to their morally disordered lifestyle. It has to be derived from positive fundamental principles and the decisions of all persons concerned.

Since the primary responsibility for a person’s health rests on the individual him/herself, people must be empowered. According to Christian understanding every person has a responsibility to choose the optimal ways for a healthy life since life itself originates from God. Even the Father of Medicine, Hipocrates, prescribes an order in medicine: first the *regimen*, the person’s lifestyle, then the medicinal treatment.¹³ Therefore the first aim in the fight against AIDS is education for a healthy lifestyle, not only for body, but also for the soul. In the stream of the pluralistic lifestyles of our age one has to critically select and decide on the correct one which guarantees a healthy life of oneself as well as that of others.

5. Support by Society

Though the individual person is responsible for his/her conduct, society too has an obligation to support the individual choice of a responsible lifestyle. With AIDS we experience that the negative effects of personal choice affects society itself as well as other members of the society. So any silence over moral values on the part of society could ruin society itself. “Permissivism means a regression of values; it destroys one of the instruments necessary in the fight against AIDS.”¹⁴ The society has to find new ways how to support its members through forms of culture, and revive supporting traditional practices for healthy ways of living.

Some Reflections on Sexuality with Regard to AIDS

The understanding of human sexuality in its relation to HIV/AIDS still remains the challenge. It means understanding the person in his/her anthropological fullness. Sexuality, according to the understanding of one prominent natural scientist, medical doctor and theologian of the Middle Ages, St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)¹⁵ belongs to the fundamental constitution of a human, (*constitutio prima*), which is designed by God. The creation of a human are as *sexus* is reflected in each and every part of the human body as well as the soul. And in sexual life find the humans the fullness of the embodiment of a person.¹⁶ So it is impossible to have any ethical discussion on AIDS without discussing how a particular group of people understand sexuality. With regard to the ethical discussion on HIV/AIDS, Laurenti Magesa – a veteran in the East African Ethics as well as a competent dialogue partner with the West – complains that “there is evident lack of cultural sensitivity in the discussion of AIDS and Africa, both in the social-medical and religious spheres.”¹⁷ So there can be no substantial solution in the fight against HIV/AIDS without taking a serious understanding of sexuality in the African culture into consideration.

Some Important African Understandings about Sexuality

Against the double dimensions of sexuality in Christianity it is to be noted that there is a triple dimension of sexuality in the African understanding according to John S. Mbiti: procreative, religious and social. At a time when sexuality is understood and practised more and more as a means for pure personal pleasure, in African culture it is a sacred phenomenon. Sexual activity is understood “as a sacred action, as a sacrament, signifying inward spiritual values”. Therefore any jokes about genital organs or a look at them, especially those of parents are severe trespasses against the sacredness of sexuality. Further, “sexual organs are gates of life”. They are meant primarily for the promotion of life. Since life is the most precious value of all, adultery is seen as a serious offence against the community laws and orders. “In some societies the guilty person (particularly a man) would be whipped, stoned to death, made to pay compensation or have his head or other part of his body mutilated. ... Fornication, incest, rape, seduction, homosexual relations, sleeping with a forbidden ‘relative’ or domestic animals, intimacy between relatives, children watching the genitals of their parents (in the wide usage of the term), all constitute sexual offences in a given community. Society deals variously with these offences, and African people are very sensitive to any departure from the accepted norm concerning all aspects of sex. This is a fundamentally religious attitude, since any offence upsets the smooth relationships of the community which includes those who have already departed.”¹⁸

Virginity

In many tribal traditions virginity is highly esteemed and valued. There are even certain rituals in the family and among the relatives to signify the value of virginity. “The blood of virginity is the symbol that life has been preserved, that the spring of life has not already been flowing wastefully, and that both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction. Only marriage may shed this sacred blood.... Virginity symbolizes purity not only of the body but also of moral life, and a virgin bride is the greatest glory and crown to her parents, husband and relatives.”¹⁹

Sacredness of Sexuality and Married life

The seriousness of sexual offences is very great. In case any offences against sexual morals have occurred there are certain prescriptions for ritual cleansing in the belief that such offences would cause misfortunes. Through these kinds of procedures the religious dimension of sexuality is strongly emphasised. The marriage, the wedding ceremony itself, the *lobola* (bridal wealth) are understood as expressions of religious happenings, saying, “We are making a sacred undertaking!” and all expressions of sexuality have a religious dimensions in married life and social life. So in respect of this religious and social dimension Mbiti says: “Marriage is, therefore, a sacred drama in which everybody is a religious participant, and no normal person may keep away from this dynamic scene of action”.²⁰ Further, the revitalisation with the departed, the living and the yet to be born is stressed as the historical dimension of a marriage so that the newly married are integrated into the totality of the family and clan.

Social Aspect of Married Life

The social aspect of marriage in African understanding is the full unity of the wife with the husband and his family. According to some African customs (e.g. Batoro) the bride is carried on the shoulders on her way to the husband’s house. This dramatized act is an expression of the new stage in the married woman’s life, that she is now being cut off from her own family and will be joined to the new family of the husband. She is then fully integrated in the clan, tribe and society of the husband. What better lively expression could

be given to the words of Jesus where a separation from the parents through marriage has to take place (cf. Mt 19:4; Mk 10:7; Gn 2:24)!²¹

Procreative Aspect of Married Life

Married life without a procreative dimension is unthinkable in the understanding of African marriage and it is stressed and accepted as an inseparable dimension of it. So it fulfils one of the Christian dimensions of marriage in its full sense. Negligence in the contribution of life through procreation is understood as loss of original immortality of the persons, which was given by God and breaks the chain of humanity.

AIDS and African Cosmology

In spite of some of this very rich understanding of sexuality the people of Africa are now confronted directly with the reality of AIDS. In search of ethical solutions one has, as far as possible, to take the African paradigm itself seriously into consideration. A very deep and correct perception of their world, culture, language, traditions, etc. is needed for any kind of ethical solution. Further, any solutions imported from outside the culture and understanding would not help to rebuild the moral integrity of the African people. So Magesa suggests that the cosmology of an African People must first be understood. It is the understanding of their own particular world which shapes their actions in respect of themselves and each other, and informs how they interpret the consequences of their actions. "This dialectic of cause-effect-cause between cosmological perception and human behaviour forms the context in which ultimate reality is interpreted."²² With regard to HIV/AIDS Magesa sees three important existent cosmologies in African understanding.

Cosmological Perspective of Tradition

The first one is the Traditional Cosmological Perspective, which influences the sexual behaviour and moral outlook of the people concerned in a different way. According to traditional understanding the violation of values of honesty and justice (even in business transactions) is a serious crime.²³ It may seem absurd that a violation in trade could cause AIDS. But the moral message of the whole issue must be appreciated. In other words, a serious violation of moral principles is even assumed to cause an incurable illness, even to endanger life itself! This cosmology refers to "the aspect of the consciousness of human community and interpersonal bonding; that harm done to one person or group of persons tends to spread. Sometimes it boomerangs on its perpetrator. This awareness, so strong in the traditional African world-view, is indispensable in inspiring responsible sexual morality and helping in the control of AIDS in Africa."²⁴

Cosmological Perspective of Sexual Morals

The second cosmological perspective deals with sexual morals. Even though people know that AIDS is a disease acquired through sexual promiscuity and not from the world of magic and through the power of witchcraft, there is a certain confusion and certain perplexity regarding sexual behaviour. The span between their knowledge and their behavioural change still seems to be unbridgeable! In other words, people need more help to see why they have to change their behaviour and how they could change their behaviour.

Cosmological Perspective of Promiscuity

According to the third cosmological perspective Magesa sees a direct link between AIDS and Sexual Promiscuity. Though there is much denial about promiscuity the rising number of HIV infection and deaths due to AIDS is to be taken seriously under the reality of the third cosmological perspective. "In many parts of Africa, the link between sexual

behaviour and AIDS is now well-established in the minds of the majority. A change in sexual behaviour does not follow suit, however”.²⁵

The current Challenge to the African and Christian understanding of Sexuality

Having seen in brief some reasons for the shift in moral principles on the one hand, and valuable African moral principles on other, the challenge is now how to integrate the valuable and still relevant ethical values in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The African continent, which is becoming more and more Christian, possesses a great tradition of sexual morality. The present challenge is to complement African moral principles with Christian moral principles. Therefore it would be appropriate to see some theological, anthropological understanding of humans which are universal and capable of complementing the African moral values.

Theological and Anthropological Understanding of Human Sexuality

The inner meaning of human sexuality is to be found in the fundamental understanding of the human anthropology. It is pictured in its basic and fundamental form in Holy Scripture. The first humans, Adam and Eve represent us all in a figurative language in our sexual nature in all its beauty and power. It is God's creation with his Spirit. It is with the same Spirit of God that the Trinity exists and how God the Father and the Son exist in the love of the Holy Spirit that was breathed into the first human, Adam. Though the term sexuality as such is not directly found in Scripture, we find its description in its language. The expressions are sometimes indirect – also due to its mysterious nature – and sometimes direct, like the nakedness of the man and woman (cf. Gn 2:25), the feelings of shame (cf. Gn 3:7; 10), or the need to protect the nakedness (cf. Gn 3:7; 21), or regarding pregnancy (cf. Gn 3:16). Further, the thinking pattern of sexuality, its exercise and the offspring, the sons and earthly daughters, are stated in connection with the heavenly sons to express how beautiful and wonderful the offspring out of sexuality could be! In short human sexuality is seen as a gift of God for humans whereas the deviation from the nature and aims of sexuality are seen as immoral, e.g. incest, homosexuality, and sodomy, etc.

According to the Jahvist creation narrative the partnership in the institution of marriage and family is God's intention: “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him” (Gn 2:18). The human, who has supremacy over all the creation, is given help for his fulfilment and wholeness in the woman who is “... is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gn 2:23). Therefore these two have to live in such an intimacy and interdependence that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body” (Gn 2:24).²⁶ Two important messages are given here: their equality and their different sexuality (Gn 1:27; 2:18-25). Further, man and woman are joined together for pro-creation (Gn 1:28; 2:24; 3:16; 4:1 ff.) which is often described in allegorical expressions such as “knowing one another” “to come to the wife”, “to see the nakedness”, “to take the wife”, “to lay near the other”, “to sleep together” etc. This is the fundamental reason why sexuality is to be exercised between these two only – since both of them live with one another only, and since both are united in the spirit, psyche, mind, and heart in such a way that even their bodies experience their intimacy as one body in the sexual acts.

Sexuality in the New Testament

In the New Testament we see the very clear prohibitions regarding extra marital and non-natural sexual activity. In his statement about marriage Jesus says clearly and radically that the foundation for the partnership between a man and a woman is an exclusive love between these two alone and that the seriousness and depth of this relationship is an act of God himself. “What God has jointed together, no human being must separate” (Mk 10:9).

Any other form of partnership is condemned by Jesus very clearly as a deviation from morality, and as adultery. A very restrictive sexual ethic is drawn by Jesus himself. It aims at the liberal sexual practices of men of antiquity. Jesus' strict prohibition on divorce (Mk 10:9; 1 Cor 7:10) was against the prevalent practices of the Jews and the Pagans. And he establishes the seriousness of this prohibition in the structure of creation where the sexual order of man and woman is stated. Jesus deepens the prohibition against adultery saying that even a lustful look at a woman is to be avoided so that the institution of the married person is protected by all means (cf. Mt 5:27 ff). Further, we see in the writings of Paul how strictly the integrity of the married life and the equality of both man and women were pursued. "The husband should fulfil his duty towards his wife, and likewise the wife towards her husband" (1 Cor 7:3a) – a revolutionary statement against the practices of antiquity where the man had the power over sexual activities with the woman and the women had always to be submissive to him! In 1 Thes 4:4 ff we see how the sexual activities even in the married life are ordered and to be practiced with balance. We see also in these statements how the faithful were advised in the early church to keep married life holy and to be keen to keep the order of the creation in their lives. Dangers of misuse are the first ones in the list of all the vices: Heb 13:4; Gal 5:19; Col 3:5. They are to be forbidden in order to avoid all forms of immoral sexual activities. A special verdict is given against homosexual activity of men and women, which is seen as being against Natural Law: Rom 1:26 f; 1. Cor 6:9; 1 Tm 1:10.

The Church and Sexual Moral Principles

The Church has not been silent about the mystery of married life in any way up to the present day. Even the Council of Trent said that the real reason why husband and wife are joined together sexually is because of the fact of the mystery between both of them. There is no deeper friendship than in married life, in which husband and wife are in the most intimate form of love and concern for one another as the image of the covenant of Christ with his Church. In this love each person shows their partner commitment and the deepest love for one another.²⁷ One of the greatest scholastic theologians of Middle Ages, Alexander of Hales (*ca. 1185 in Hales and †21.08.1245 in Paris) dares to say that the conjugal act of married persons reflects the deepest love of God to humanity; sexual love is the binding power that unites them in lifelong community. So the real understanding of sexuality and its practices is interpreted and taught by the Church from time immemorial.²⁸

Role of the Church Today

The church today exercises the role of the Good Samaritan with deep dedication to nurse the crestfallen suffering from HIV/AIDS. It is very praiseworthy and is appreciated even by Non-Christians and atheists. But a healing is not yet possible in the case of crestfallen humans under HIV/AIDS as in the case of the wounded man of Jesus' story of Good Samaritan. The story of Jesus does not say anything about the possibility of a second attack on the same traveller or another person under the same circumstance. In that case the unanswered question remains: What to do so that no more attacks will happen and travellers are able to reach their destinations of life safely without fear and anxiety? The challenge of HIV/AIDS is the same it seems. Till each and everyone in the continent has completely defeat the fatal structures of HIV/AIDS, the Church and society will not have completed their mission.

It is an effective programme to provide people with a positive appreciation of responsible sexuality based on the principles of African and Biblical moral values. It is the new method to combat the immensely attractive power of the media where the value of sexuality is made cheap. It is above all the spiritual, liturgical, psychological and educational supports that really understand the people in their search for permanent values. It is an

intensification of the support for AIDS victims without any condemnation and prejudice. It is the protection of the dignity of human sexuality, which is envisaged and given by God himself. It is the challenge to understand sexuality in our search for the meaning of life.

Conclusion

In this brief reflection we have seen how the traditional, healthy, valuable and bold sexual moral principles are shaken or even swept away to certain extent in the flow of the time and its influences. And as long as HIV/AIDS is closely related to the human sexuality it is a serious challenge to a particular community, country and continent to their sexual understanding and its practices. So the challenge of to the African and Christian understanding of sexual moral principles has to derive new forms of educational methods and implementation of healthy sexual moral principles which would substantially help to eradicate the infectious behaviours of humans; in other words, to help people change their paths of unhealthy behaviour to healthy, fully human and Christian life. And it is nothing but the task and challenge of an internal and dynamic exercise of sexuality which enables the human love to be fully meaningful as God designed it to be.

¹ Laurenti Magesa observes on the basis of studies by Sulayman S. Nyang and S. Haneef that Islam has had more success in keeping traditional moral values and customs in Africa than Christianity. S.S. Nyang: *Islam, Christianity and African Identity*. (Bittelboro: Amana Books) 1984 and of S. Haneef: *What Everyone should know about Islam and Muslims*. (Chicago: Kazi Publications) 1979. Cf. In: L. Magesa: "AIDS and Survival in Africa: a tentative reflection". p 205-207. But this does not necessarily mean that Christian moral principles are practised with laxity everywhere in Africa and that they inadequate to bring clarity to the present situation. Such a generalisation does not reflect the sincere and integral lives of many Christians in the continent and could lead the people into further mental and moral confusion.

² The reasons for this kind of practice may be manifold: dissatisfaction with the sexual practices between the partners, illness of one partner, love, sentimental relationship with somebody, sex as means for receiving privileges, sexual adventures etc.

³ In one of the film clips advertising the use of condoms against the spread of AIDS the contradictory message of the film comes at the end, as the strange young beautiful lady takes a condom from her hand bag and puts it on the gun barrel of the strange young man as he enters a new town! The unsaid double message given here could only be this: "Enjoy your sexual pleasure with the stranger using the condom!"

⁴ Some of the still prevalent sexual customs and behaviour in Africa were not of that fatal character before the arrival of AIDS in the continent, such as circumcision, wife inheritance, hospitality through sexual submissiveness, etc. But the arrival of AIDS in the continent compels rethinking about them and, if necessary, changing and abolishing them. Customs are not unchangeable and are subject to purification.

⁵ UNAIDS: Knowledge and behavioural indicators. In: Report on the global HIV/AIDS epidemic 2002 (Geneva) 2002, p. 193. (The next report on the Global epidemic will be published in July 2004 at the International Conference on AIDS in Bangkok).

⁶ M. D. Grmek: *History of AIDS: Emergence and Origin of a Modern Epidemic*. – (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1990, p. 176.

⁷ "According to the report of a study on the magnitude and consequences of unsafe abortion, more than 300,000 abortions occur in the country annually and the Government spends Ksh 18.1 million on post abortion care..... The report states that over 20,000 women and girls with incomplete abortions are admitted annually to public hospitals. And four out of 10 women who die from unsafe abortion complications are aged 20 to 34 years." East African Standard, Friday, May 7, 2004, p. 40.

⁸ George Nyabera: "AIDS war is not going to be won by condoms". In: East African Standard, Sat. April 24, 2004. p. 8.

⁹ AIDS stands for the abbreviation of *Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome*.

¹⁰ John Paul II: "The Church in Face of the Twofold Challenge in AIDS." In: To live: Why? AIDS. – Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference. Dolentium Hominum No 13, 1990, p. 7.

¹¹ Personal notes during the participation in ICSA 21-26 September 2003.

¹² This venture hit even the headlines of "The Times Weekend" on Saturday, July 29, 2000. Cf. Catholic Medical Quarterly. Journal of the Guild of Catholic Doctors (London), Vol. L. No. 4 (290) Nov. 2000, p. 8-9.

¹³ Throughout the History of Medicine it is seen how the importance of a correct regimen for a healthy life is stressed and understood as proper to the Christian way of living. E.g. Petrus Hispanus (the only medical doctor who became the Pope till today!), Paracelsus. Cf. Paul Chummar Chittilappilly: Zwischen Kosmos und Zeit. Zum Gespräch zwischen Medizin und Ethik. Frankfurter Beiträge zur Geschichte, Theorie und Ethik der Medizin. Bd. 14. – (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Olms-Weidmann) 2000, p. 192-195; 199-201.

¹⁴ G. Cottier: "Is AIDS a Sign of Times?" In: To live: Why? AIDS. – Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference. Dolentium Hominum No 13, 1990, p.38.

¹⁵ The writings of Hildegard of Bingen about the Nature, Universe, Persons in the Nature, the Constitution of Body etc. are great sources of anthropological understanding.

¹⁶ Hildegard von Bingen: Liber Divinorum Operum VI, 5, cit. in: H. Schipperges: Hildegard von Bingen. – (München: C. H. Beck) ²1995, p. 56.

¹⁷ L. Magesa: "AIDS and Survival in Africa: a tentative reflection." In: J. N. K. Mugambi/A. Nasike (Ed.): Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity. A Challenge for African Christianity. – (Nairobi. Action Publishers) ³2003. p. 197.

¹⁸ J. S. Mbiti: African religions and philosophy. – (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers) ¹⁸2002, p. 147-148.

¹⁹ J. S. Mbiti: African religions and philosophy. p. 141.

²⁰ J. S. Mbiti: African religions and philosophy. p. 148.

²¹ Even psychologically this separation of the umbilical cord from the parents family and house has to happen for the stability and growth of the newly erected family of wedded.

²² L. Magesa: "AIDS and Survival in Africa: a tentative reflection.", p. 198.

²³ AIDS is believed by some people as the punishment of dishonesty and cheating in a business trade. Cf. E. Hooper: Slim: A Reporter's Own Story of AIDS in East Africa.– (London) 1990, p. 59.

²⁴ L. Magesa: "AIDS and Survival in Africa: a tentative reflection.", p. 199.

²⁵ L. Magesa: "AIDS and Survival in Africa: a tentative reflection.", p. 200.

²⁶ Cf. Claude Wiéner. „Ehe“. In: Wörterbuch zur Biblischen Botschaft. Xavier Léon-Dufour (Ed.). – Freiburg i. Br. (Herder) ²1967, p. 114.

²⁷ Cf. Translation of M. Gatterer: Catechismus Romanus. Das Religionsbuch der Kirche (veröffentlicht in 1566). – Innsbruck 1934, No. 14, 15, 27.

²⁸ The present Pope John Paul II emphasises and supports the dignity of married life and even equates in its status with a celibate life of priests and religious people.
