

## **Oikonomia in practical terms or what to expect from the Catholic Church?**

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In the first article, I argued that the principle of “oikonomia” might provide a solution for the Catholic Church to respond in a responsible way to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The pandemic is clearly a “Sign of the Times” as expressed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In this follow-up article I spell out the practical consequences of applying this principle.

Dealing with the crisis of HIV and AIDS, by applying the principal of “oikonomia” the long-term debate about the moral value system of the Catholic Church or other Christian churches can be suspended. It would have an immediate impact. It would respect the right of the Church to undergo its long process of reaching a doctrinal decision while at the same time responding to the immediate reality of people dying of causes related to AIDS every day. Simply put, the virus does not really care about the length of time the Church requires to decide whether condoms may be used for the purpose of preventing the transmission of the HI virus.

“Oikonomia” means the application of God’s unconditional love for people in a certain situation by accepting the standing rules which are overwritten in these circumstances. It is this principle which, for example, the Orthodox Church applies when admitting divorced people to a new bond of marriage.

We are aware that in our times millions are dying of AIDS-related causes, and we are conscious of the impending suffering millions more will face. Christians cannot be blind to this.

Some, especially moral theologians, point out that I say nothing new because in effect quite a handful of bishops are already heading in the same direction, advocating, for example, the use of condoms in certain circumstances. This is true, yet, for as long as I take seriously the magisterium (or teaching authority) of the Catholic Church, combined with the prevailing centralism of the Church, I am looking for a compassionate word from Rome. This would eliminate the confusion of different viewpoints being expressed and carry more weight than the diversity of bishop’s opinions. A compassionate response would protect and save more and more lives.

Some have accused me of trying to open the floodgates of immoral behaviour and fostering pre-marital sex by calling for the application of “oikonomia”. Nothing could be further from my intentions than this. I fail to understand however, why tolerating the use of condoms should generally and in all cases encourage promiscuity and immoral behaviour. Nor do I understand why a piece of latex should cause such heated discussion within the Church.

The ABC (Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise) represents three options which can protect life and we should leave it to the conscience of the individual as to what kind of option he or she is taking. Of course we as the Church are

entitled to proclaim our value system. Yet, now is not the time to literally demonise the third option.

I have frequently been asked whether “oikonomia” in this instance does not mean anything more than advocating condoms indirectly.

As somebody who has worked in the field of HIV/AIDS for many years, I identify many ways the Church could respond positively as a consequence of “oikonomia”.

First and foremost: we have to fight the stigma of HIV/AIDS.

Welcoming people living with the virus openly and warmly is the first step. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, we must open our arms and offer no judgment. It is so easy to exercise compassion for innocent babies and children, but somehow our reactions are different when it comes to adults. This must change.

Why not use the parishes to advocate and practise VCT (voluntary counselling and testing)? The Catholic Church is the world's largest religious body, what a difference we could make by ensuring that more and more people know their status and act accordingly!

Testing before marriage and advocating marriage despite a possible positive test result! No rejection, but acknowledgement of the facts and support and help in dealing with it without judgement? Already the bishops' conferences of Southern Africa and Namibia have acknowledged that the condom can play a preventative role in a marriage where one spouse is HIV-positive, and the other is not.

People living with the virus are increasingly experiencing difficulties to travel, to study abroad. I would like to see the Catholic Church advocating the abolishment of travel restrictions in the same vehemence it is fighting against certain forms of cohabital partnership. Travel restrictions are a form of stigmatisation, and the Catholic Church is, as it has proven in other fields, clearly able to lead a worldwide campaign against other forms of stigmatisation.

Research has established that a positive test result or disclosure does not result automatically in more protective behaviour. We must identify the strategies that really work in provoking behavioural changes.

What a burden would be lifted from people living with the virus, when they were welcomed as brothers and sisters instead of facing all kind of forms of rejection, even being kicked out of the communities. How much would their lives change if the Church were to welcome and care for them when they are still strong, not just when they are sick and dying?

Of course, we also will meet people who are not interested in our value system. But even to them we have to spell out all options available to protect themselves. Doing so is not a betrayal of the Catholic value system, nor should it be the place of intense missionary work.

When HIV first came into the public's consciousness, US President Ronald Reagan failed to act because he as a "good Christian" saw it as a "gay disease" and as a punishment for those he saw as doing wrong. This approach made it impossible for his government to act in a swift and proper way to contain the disease. Today, Africa carries the burden of this indecision. This should remind us that everything we teach or do as Christians and as Catholics influences the development of the disease.

This may also remind us that we need to exercise "oikonomia" to ourselves and consequently to all brothers and sisters in the unconditional way God loves us. This is what we are called to in the first place, not only in what we preach, but also in what we practise. Be it the parable of the Good Samaritan or the forgiving father, it is practising Jesus' good message which is overflowing love. This love must be spelled out in practice, not only in sermons.