

Virtue Ethics in the Age of HIV
(From the lecture “Infectious Virtue”)
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Abstract

While the worldwide incidence of HIV/AIDS declines, the number of seropositive individuals continue to rise exponentially in our country. The primary concern affecting people living with HIV/AIDS is the stigmatization associated with the disease. How do we, as a Church respond to this crisis? In contemporary moral theology, the emphasis is given to the rediscovery of the virtue ethics. Following the eudaemonistic teleology of Thomas Aquinas, the virtues, especially compassion, can inform how institutions respond to the HIV/ AIDS situation in a manner that uplifts the dignity of persons, faithful to the teaching of Christ, and addresses the harm of stigmatization.

Introduction

Everything has been done before. As Qoheleth said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” (Eccl. 1:9)

I begin this discussion on HIV/AIDS with the universal biohazard symbol. To many, this symbol of danger represents toxic substances, radioactive material, and poisonous chemicals. But for the queer community in San Francisco, USA this is a sign of HIV/AIDS. It becomes a sort of a silent warning to anybody intending to engage in casual sexual relations. Bug-chasers and gift-givers use this symbol. Bug-chasing and its counterpart, gift-giving, are part of a subculture in the gay community. Bug-chasers seek to be infected by seropositive patients, while gift-givers willfully infect others. This notorious activity was a fad in the middle of the previous decade. Since then, the majority are more careful and responsible in using protection or informing casual partners of their HIV status. The question is what will be the next fad in this colorful community as there is nothing new under the sun?

The problem of HIV infection (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is entirely different in the Philippines. Today, both government and civil society are active in their campaign against HIV. Even the Church has programs to reach out to young people, and so I will not go there in this lecture. But as Church people, we

ask, where do we situate ourselves in approaching HIV? What I am proposing here is a paradigm that is not new. In fact, it comes from very ancient sources – a methodic bioethical approach based on virtue ethics. Following the lead of bug-chasers and gift-givers, we as a Church can become agents of infection, not of viruses and disease, but of virtue. We do not give and chase after HIV but transmit the infectious virtues of compassion, loyalty, justice, and care.