

Message for World AIDS Day, 1 December 2007

From Fratern Masawe SJ, Moderator of JESAM, to all the Jesuits of Africa and Madagascar

Dear companions and friends in the Lord,
World AIDS Day 2007 is a fitting time to recall our God-given responsibility to continue responding to what remains an urgent challenge of our times. By reading the signs of HIV and AIDS, these times are a privileged moment to act lovingly and compassionately like God in the face of suffering and extreme need.

The overall theme of World AIDS Day 2007, and of the international AIDS struggle in the years to come, is *leadership*, under the slogan, *Take the lead. Stop AIDS*. In recent years, our response has been led by the African Jesuit AIDS Network (AJAN), which was set up by the Jesuit Superiors of Africa and Madagascar (JESAM) in 2002.

As AJAN marks its fifth anniversary this year, it has clearly found its place on the frontlines of Church AIDS ministry in Africa, taking the lead in encouraging an ever stronger and more informed Christian response to the challenges thrown up by the pandemic.

There are obvious successes - a website, widely read publications, useful links with NGOs, AJAN House in Kangemi, Nairobi, with a well-stocked resource centre - and others which are less apparent but vital nonetheless, like the nurturing of a sense of belonging among Jesuits doing AIDS ministry, who are growing steadily in number.

Please remember that AJAN is only as good as the Jesuit response it harnesses. Its foremost aim is to encourage Jesuits in Africa and Madagascar to take the lead in confronting HIV and AIDS; in accompanying men, women and children who are infected and affected; in advocating for their dignity and justice; in promoting value-based education which embraces people and communities in their wholeness; and in developing a sound theological and sociological approach which underpins all these efforts.

Leadership means going beyond fear caused by stigma or ignorance. It means familiarity with many issues related to HIV and AIDS, and competence and creativity in pastoral outreach. It means the courage of our convictions and faithfulness in what is doubtless a long and hard fight.

World AIDS Day coincides with the feast day of a Congolese woman who exemplified these qualities: Blessed Anuarite Nengapeta, a Sister of the Holy Family. This remarkable young midwife, who devoted her life to serving others, was martyred in 1964 for resisting the sexual demands of a rebel leader in the Congo. AJAN joins many African youth in looking to Anuarite as an outstanding model of chastity and fidelity, who inspires hope, perseverance and confidence in the struggle against AIDS.

Had Blessed Anuarite lived out her years here on earth, she would have been a leader in the war on AIDS. From heaven, she can do even more. Together with her and many saints and ancestors, we stand a good chance of winning the battle.

Let us then, renew our joint commitment to enhancing the full cycle of life, so often broken by HIV and AIDS. It is time to evaluate our community services, care-giving facilities and other ministries, to identify ways in which we can educate each other and reinforce the choice for life, making God's tender love for Africa manifest to those around us who are touched by the pandemic.