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The Rewards of Virtue: Combating the Global Plague of AIDS

by

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Complacency regarding the suffering of others is easily condemned in ethical terms, but indifference can also result in great danger to ourselves as well. The modern-day plague of AIDS is often regarded as a disease affecting only others, but it has been gathering strength for decades, stalking ever-greater numbers in an ever-expanding range. And we are not immune from its implacable advance in this country and around the world.

No humane person can be indifferent to the massive suffering this disease has already wrought to its tens of millions of victims and their families and communities. In many areas of the world, the toll threatens entire generations, even whole countries. And the threat is spreading, aided by a refusal of governments and citizens alike to take heed of countless warnings.

Let me cite some chilling statistics: It is estimated that, world-wide, 8,000 people die from this disease every day, 25 million have already perished, a figure that is expected to rise to 80 million by 2010. Among the most tragic results are the estimated 40 million orphans who will be left behind, many of them infected with the AIDS virus. 36 million people are newly infected every year. In some countries in Africa, where the disease has hit the hardest, the rate of infection has reached 30% of the general population. And it is spreading quickly in that and other continents.

Thus, for both humanitarian reasons and their own self-interest, the United States and other countries must begin taking aggressive action to halt this quickly spreading plague.

I am pleased to note that while many talk about the need to do something, the United States has launched a massive project to combat the spread of AIDS, centered on the hardest hit areas in Africa where the disease is raging most freely. I am proud to have been the original sponsor

of that legislation which authorizes \$15 billion over five years, for treatment, care, and prevention.

This strategy embraces a multisectoral approach, including antiretroviral therapy for people living with AIDS, along with extended palliative care; support efforts to find vaccines for HIV/AIDS and malaria; emphasizes the need to keep families together, with particular focus on the assistance needs of children and young people with HIV; contributes to multilateral initiatives that leverage the funds of others.

This massive program reflects the exceptional generosity of the American people and a long-term commitment by the US government. It is our hope that it will be a major enhancement of efforts to stem the spread of this disease and improve the lives of those millions already infected with the virus. But it is in no way a cure-all. Other countries must be persuaded to greatly increase their efforts to halt its spread and care of the afflicted. Most important of all is for government in those regions where the disease is already raging, as well as those where it has reached the beginning stages of an epidemic, to realize the imminent threat their populations are facing and to launch an all-out effort to halt the spread of the disease before it escapes altogether our ability to control it.

Even as we ask governments to step up their efforts, we must remember the key role that the private, no-government sector, such as Divine Word Missionaries, in this and other countries must play. A large number of organizations are already dedicated to caring for those directly affected by this disease and to halting its spread through education and other means. It is these which have the closest direct contact with populations and the most extensive experience in mobilizing communities to take the necessary action to protect themselves. Without their central role, no solution is possible.

AIDS is a truly global plague, one from which no county has proven immune. We might wish to close our eyes to the consequences of its expanding toll and huddle safely behind our borders, but neither conscience nor reason will permit such a self-destructive act. Only a fool would believe that lines drawn on a map represent impregnable walls or that a country can insulate itself from harm while the world crumbles around it. Instead, our safety is to be found in helping others defend themselves from this threat.

In helping to save the lives of others and ensure the safety of their communities, we are keeping faith with our moral responsibilities. And by so doing, we secure not only our own safety, but render ourselves a blessing.