

## **MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH HIV-POSITIVE PEOPLE**

In connection with World AIDS Day on December 1<sup>st</sup>, I would like to share my experience and thoughts on HIV as many other religious leaders do. We all have to make sure that we, who fortunately live in communities so far spared by this pandemic, are prepared so we can act as good and caring Christians when the day comes when we for the first time meet a person with HIV.

I had an interesting experience in the summer of 1986 when I shook hands with two HIV-positive people at Nassau County Medical Center – East Meadow, New York.

I was taking a course in clinical pastoral education with Revd. Thomas F. Kennedy. The course was about ten weeks in length, and one morning Revd. Kennedy informed us that a nurse was coming to do an hour-long presentation about AIDS. At the end of the lecture, the nurse escorted us to the sixth floor of the medical center and told us that two rooms on this floor had been designated for people with AIDS.

Before I entered the room, I thought that HIV-positive people would be quarantined, but when we entered the room, I saw two patients, who seemed to me to be just like any other sick people. The nurse introduced us and said that she had been taking care of these two patients for five years and had not contracted AIDS. She affirmed that HIV is not transmitted through normal handshaking or breathing.

Revd. Kennedy proceeded to shake the patients' hands and we followed suit. Initially, I was hesitant, but then I took heart and thought to myself, "If the fear of dying is hindering me from shaking hands, then I should choose shaking hands and dying."

Our world nowadays is very similar to the world of the past some 2,000 years ago. Some people still treat HIV-positive people the same way that people with leprosy used to be treated at the time of Christ. A leper used to be shunned and quarantined, and leprosy itself was explained as God's anger towards people.

Jesus, however, never ignored lepers or other marginalized people. We owe it ourselves to follow Christ's example by standing humanely with HIV-positive people and other marginalized groups in our society. I assure you all that I will not condemn any in our church who is living with HIV. I will welcome that person and sit down, share a meal and discuss how Christ came to heal persons in such a difficult situation, and to bring them salvation through His suffering, death and resurrection.

Eustathius Matta Roham,  
Archbishop of Jazirah and Euphrates  
Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch  
HASSAKA, SYRIA