

Church must dispel prejudice about its stance on AIDS

LONDON -The Catholic Church must do more to dispel “mistaken prejudices” about its attitudes to people with HIV/AIDS, said a Scottish archbishop.

“It needs to be said again and again that the Catholic Church is committed to those works of mercy in the field of HIV/AIDS,” said Archbishop Mario Conti of Glasgow, Scotland.

The archbishop spoke in Kiev, Ukraine, in late April to a Caritas-sponsored conference on HIV/AIDS in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. An archdiocesan official provided Catholic News Service in London with a copy of the text.

Archbishop Conti said it was “very regrettable” that some people think the church is unsympathetic to AIDS patients because, in many cases, HIV is transmitted through sexual intercourse.

“Worse still, an accusation has been leveled at the church that its attitude and teaching against the use of condoms has been a factor in the spread of the disease,” he said.

The archbishop said he thought there were “legitimate questions” over whether the church should allow married couples to use condoms to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

“However, there is a danger in us becoming too wrapped up in these very specific circumstances and failing to see the very limited role of the condom in this issue,” he said.

“Of far greater importance than the so-called condom conundrum is behavioral change,” he added. “Uganda is one of the greatest success stories in the fight against AIDS, with its abstinence program bringing down the HIV infection rate from more than 30 percent to below 6 percent.”

The archbishop noted that 25 percent of people in the world with HIV/AIDS are being assisted or cared for by Catholic institutions or workers.

He also told his audience that the care of people with HIV/AIDS was a corporal work of mercy in keeping with centuries of tradition in the church.

He called on church agencies to lead by example and said Catholics must show through their daily lives that they do not view AIDS as a “plague from God.”