

Mother Teresa's nuns join church effort against HIV/AIDS

PUEBLA, Mexico - Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity - known for helping the poorest of the poor - are working with Mexicans with HIV/AIDS.

In the bustling industrial city of Puebla, a Peruvian sister and three others from India care for people dying of AIDS - most of them from other areas in Mexico.

Mother Maria Nieves said that when people with HIV/AIDS are sent to the nuns, "They are desperate."

"Many are in the last phase of their illness and have given up all hope," she said. "They don't want to eat; they don't want to take their medication. They only want to die."

"Many come from a nonreligious background and therefore need a lot of convincing regarding the ministries of the church," she said. "We talk to them and pray with them. We help them regain their self-esteem. Some get better; some don't. It all depends on the person. While we have had people who died, we have also had patients whose condition stabilized."

One of the sisters' patients is a wealthy 51-year-old Mexico City businessman who was abandoned by his wife.

"She simply couldn't take the burden any longer," Mother Maria said. "She and their three children come to visit once in a while, but that is all."

Mother Maria said HIV patients battle misinformation and prejudice.

The HIV infection rate is only 0.3 percent in Mexico - far lower than in other parts of the world. But authorities are concerned that migrants increasingly are carrying the disease to Mexico. They say migrant men run a great risk of becoming infected and passing the virus to their wives or other sexual partners.

Dr. Ana Berta Arizpe, an infectious disease expert, said the biggest problem in Mexico is that AIDS is associated with homosexuality, "which means people who are infected are thought to be either gay, male prostitutes or drug addicts."

"And gay people are viewed very negatively in this macho culture," she said. "The prejudice and stigmatization go so far as to make families believe they have been betrayed by their infected relatives."

The Catholic Church is revitalizing its awareness campaign to sensitize people about

HIV/AIDS. “Esperanza de VIHDA” (Hope for Life) is the bishops’ social program to create awareness about the marginalization and discrimination associated with people affected by HIV/AIDS.

The program is an “invitation to solidarity without placing blame and without preconditions,” said Auxiliary Bishop Gustavo Rodriguez Vega of Monterrey, head of Caritas Mexico, during a recent symposium at the Jesuit university in Puebla. Caritas Mexico is the local affiliate of Caritas Internationalis, an umbrella organization of Catholic aid agencies.

Bishop Rodriguez said it was the bishops’ “intention to create a conscience of solidarity with, and compassion for, the infected.”

“In 2004, Pope John Paul II made an urgent appeal for help for the suffering countries in Africa. While Catholics in Mexico were ready to contribute, the Mexican church also recognized the need to do something at home,” said the bishop. “It is a fact that HIV-positive people are discriminated against at school, at work and in public.”

Though the church is very close to the poor and therefore also close to those with HIV, the bishop said it is not the church’s “intention to facilitate medical care or promote the use of condoms.”

“We want to educate through our ministries down to the parish level,” he said.

“The church cooperates as well as it can with the health authorities,” said the bishop. “However, our main mission is to minister to the sick, to accompany them, to reassure them and to give them hope.

“They need not only medicine but also human kindness,” he said.

Caritas Mexico has organized workshops all over the country, connecting different initiatives and organizations. So far, it has a network of about 70 institutions that give advice or –as the Missionaries of Charity do – care for patients in the last stage of life.

“It is very difficult for the church to talk about AIDS,” said Sister Ludmila Garcia of the Crucified Missionaries of the Church.

“Although experts agree that abstinence is the best protection, the church is being coerced into promoting the use of condoms,” she said. “The public in Mexico doesn’t like to hear about morality and responsibilities.”