

Papal foundation plans to expand assistance to AIDS patients

VATICAN CITY – A papal foundation dedicated to AIDS patients may expand its services to include a global program of distributing anti-AIDS drugs, a Vatican official said.

The initiative would respond to the shortage of antiretroviral and other drugs in poorer countries, where the vast majority of AIDS patients receive no adequate treatment, Monsignor Jean-Marie Mupendawatu, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, said in an interview July 21 with the Vatican newspaper.

Monsignor Mupendawatu is a delegate to the Good Samaritan Foundation, established by Blessed John Paul II in 2004 to provide economic support to the sick who are most in need, particularly those suffering from AIDS.

Monsignor Mupendawatu said the foundation planned to strengthen its activity, especially in Africa, by increasing its promotion of donations of pharmaceutical and medical material, and by working more closely with local Catholic leaders to place the church in the forefront of the care for AIDS patients.

To favor these efforts, he said, the foundation may open offices on every continent, which would function in coordination with the central office in Rome.

“The foundation is also studying the possibility of creating its own ‘pharmaceutical center’ which would allow the collection and distribution of medicines in poor countries,” he said. The center would work in cooperation with other church agencies.

Monsignor Mupendawatu said that while more than 25 percent of the global health care to AIDS patients is provided by Catholic institutions, the church needs to do even more in the face of the epidemic, which infects about 7,000 additional people each day.

One of the church’s priorities is to help make “universal and free access to

treatment” a reality for all those infected with AIDS, he said. Today, only about 5 percent of people with AIDS receive adequate care, he said.

“It’s enough to realize that the majority (of AIDS patients) in Africa live on a dollar a day and cannot afford any treatment. Therefore, it’s necessary to reach the essential goal of no-cost drugs,” he said.

Monsignor Mupendawatu said the church’s insistence that education in responsible sexuality be part of any anti-AIDS strategy has found appreciation in scientific circles. The church’s position is that effective prevention of AIDS must include the abandonment of high-risk behavior and the adoption of a “balanced sexuality” based on premarital chastity and marital fidelity, he said.

He noted that Pope Benedict XVI’s monthly prayer intention for July evoked the church’s commitment to AIDS sufferers: “That Christians may ease the physical and spiritual sufferings of those who are sick with AIDS, especially in the poorest countries.”