

That You act Justly

[Br Vincent Kingston](#)

I write this as children in this country are beginning a new school year, so it is an appropriate time to take stock of progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of primary education for all children by 2015. (Bear in mind that 7 of those 15 years have already gone by...)

The following statistics are taken from the current issue of "Developments", the quarterly publication of the Department of International Development.

- The number of primary school pupils in India increased by almost 6 million between 2001 and 2003.
- At the current rate of progress at least 75 countries, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, will not achieve the MDG of universal primary education by 2015.
- 57% of the 77 million out of school children are girls.
- 100 developing countries now have equal numbers of boys and girls in primary schools, and another 18 are on track to achieve gender parity by 2015.
- 38 million children do not go to school in Africa.
- In Yemen nearly 200,000 more girls started school in 2004 than in 2002.
- An extra year of education for African girls can increase their eventual wages by about 15%.
- In Africa children whose mothers received five years primary education are 40% more likely to live beyond the age of five.
- In 1999 over 1,000,000 children in sub-Saharan Africa lost their teachers through AIDS.
- Since abolishing school fees in Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, more than 1,000,000 extra children in each country have enrolled in primary education.

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I share with you this month the following powerful and poignant story. While it highlights issues of poverty, it also questions aspects of our view of sin. Fr Kevin Kelly relates this inspiring story with all the understanding and compassion of Jesus himself. (It is reproduced here by kind permission of the editor of Interact, the magazine of the Catholic Agency Progressio.)

A saint living with AIDS

A young woman's dignity in the face of AIDS should be an inspiration to us all, writes Fr Kevin Kelly.

WHEN I WAS IN MANILA some years ago for a meeting of Asian theologians on HIV and AIDS, I had the

privilege to meet a saint. She was a young Filipino woman called Maria (not her real name).

She was raped by her father while still very young. This left her feeling unclean and worthless - to quote her own words, fit only for the rubbish dump. In many Asian cultures men expect women to be virgins when they marry, even though the men follow a much lower standard for themselves. So Maria felt like a reject. Moreover, young Asian women are often expected to shoulder the responsibility for looking after their younger sisters and brothers, as well as providing for their parents. In Maria's case she felt this obligation very deeply as she wanted to safeguard her young sisters from her father.

To support them, Maria tried a variety of jobs but the pay was never enough. Eventually she joined the thousands of other girls who, out of desperation to support their families and parents, are forced into prostitution through sheer poverty. The way Maria put it to me was that she felt so worthless and unclean, she had nothing to lose by becoming a prostitute. It was all she was good for - and it would help to save her sisters. As she was saying this, I could not help thinking of the words of Jesus: 'Greater love has no one than to lay down one's life for one's friends.' It had never dawned on me before that becoming a prostitute might be an act of heroic self-sacrifice. Yet that seems to have been so in Maria's case.

Almost inevitably Maria became infected with HIV.

This brought her into contact with a Catholic HIV and AIDS organisation which enabled her to give up working as a prostitute. When I met Maria, she was helping this organisation with its AIDS-prevention educational programme. As she said to me: 'When I was told I was HIV-positive, I prayed to God that I might be the last person this would happen to.' She was also spending a lot of her time helping to nurse men and women in the more advanced stages of AIDS.

Not only did this expose her to infection due to her diminishing immune system. It highlighted the suffering and physical degradation that almost certainly lay ahead for her. Maria spoke very openly to me about her future. She said she trusted God absolutely and knew God would be with her through whatever horrors she had to face. I was almost moved to tears by her deep faith and utter trust in God.

'Hate the sin and love the sinner.' Applying this advice suggests that we should hate Maria's sin of

becoming a prostitute but love her, the sinner. Yet I believe that would be a serious misreading of the situation. Maria and women with a similar story to hers should not be called sinners. They are victims of sin. They are the victims of the sinful men who abuse them and of the sinful attitude that regards women as inferior to men. They are also victims of the structural sin of a system of trade and economics which has destroyed the livelihood of the farming communities these women come from and reduced them and their families to abject poverty. A Good Shepherd sister I met in Thailand, working with women in a similar plight to Maria, refused to call such women prostitutes. She always referred to them as 'women lacking opportunities'.

Some people would condemn Maria. It is her own fault that she has AIDS, they would say. It serves her right for engaging in prostitution. God is punish-

ing her for her sin. Such words sound more like the sentiments of the scribes and Pharisees, rather than of Jesus. Though Jesus would have been angered by the unjust situation that drove Maria into dehumanising prostitution, he would certainly have appreciated her inner goodness and been moved by her spirit of generous self-sacrifice. 'Greater love has no one...'

Before I left, Maria asked me to pray for her. I replied by asking her to pray for me. I believed that her prayers would carry greater weight before the Lord than mine. I felt privileged to have a living saint praying for me.

Fr Kevin Kelly is parish priest at St Basil & All Saints RC/Anglican church in Widnes. His book New directions in sexual ethics: Moral theology and the challenge of AIDS (1998) is available to download free from www.hope.ac.uk/humanities/theology/staff/kellyk.htm