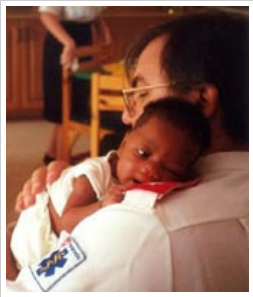
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A Prescription for Injustice: Part 2

On the Frontlines of the Epidemic: Interview with Father Gérard Tonque Lagleder

by Kate Baggott



BH: Blessed Gerard's Hospice cares for the dying because hospitals and families are often so overburdened. In the developed world, we've heard many stories of grandmothers' caring for 10 or more of their grandchildren because their parents have died. Is this a true picture? How much more is there to the situation that we don't know about?

Father Gérard Tonque Lagleder: The picture is much worse. I know of grannies who have to look after far more than 10 grandchildren. Once I went on a sick call to see someone was very sick and urgently needed our help. The patient had just passed away, when our ambulance arrived at the caller's hut. The old lady was too exhausted to cry. She just looked around in absolute desperation.

"This was my last child," she said. She went with me outside the Kraal and showed me the graves of her six other children. None of them was weathered. In the background were sixteen children between a few months-old and their teens. "These are my grandchildren" [she tells me]. "And I have to look after them with one old age grant of less than 100 Euro per month." What is even worse is what happens when granny dies. There are many child-headed households now, where 12 to 16 year old children look after their younger siblings. Even worse is that some of them really do not know how to get the funds to feed all the mouths, clothe everybody and pay their school fees. So they turn to prostitution to survive and get infected themselves. That's the route of the second AIDS wave.

class="text11">A major problem is ignorance on one side and ruthless greed on the other. It is easy to convince somebody who believes that sickness is caused by spells, evil spirits, dissatisfied ancestral spirits, or by witchcraft, that all the "westernized" medicine is nonsense that cannot meet the needs of the traditional African. Word of mouth has widely gone round that an HIV positive man can cleanse himself from infection by having sex with a virgin. As the average African in our area starts being sexually active by the age of 12, virgins are only found in a much younger age. There are many, many cases of rape of little children, even babies. We have dealt with a nine month old baby, who was raped by her own father and was so badly mutilated that she died later.

"Sub-Saharan Africa is on the way of extinction and—failing that medical science will find a cure for AIDS—this can only be avoided if drastic prevention measures are implemented soon."

Ruthless greed also tries to make money out of desperate patients with herbal remedies, which are supposed to cure AIDS, like the recent scandal about "ubhejane."

(The word ubhejane means rhinoceros, but in this case it refers to an herbal concoction made by one of the more famous snake oil salesmen touring Africa who claim they have found a "traditional cure" for AIDS - ED).

BH: Your order also runs a children's home for those orphaned by AIDS. Do many of your patients leave dependent children behind? How many of the children is your order caring for?

FGTL: There are many children left behind when their mother dies in our hospice. We have looked after 363 children so far. Our children's home has 40 beds and is always full, but the patients are always coming and going. Many of them move to the pediatric ward of our hospice when they are sick and return to the children's home, when they feel better. Some of them pass away because of AIDS, but many of them can go back to their families when their conditions are stable and when there is somebody in the family who can take on the responsibility of caring for them.

BH: Questions have been raised about the ability of some African nations to continue to offer even the most basic structures of a civil society because of the severity of the epidemic. What do you believe this means as a global issue?

FGTL: Sub-Saharan Africa is on the way of extinction and—[unless] medical science finds a cure for AIDS—this can only be avoided if drastic prevention measures are implemented soon.

BH: What does your order need most from readers of this article who are outside Africa?

FGTL: The main need is financial support. We have built up a very good infrastructure and we have the personnel and many local volunteers, but we have to pay salaries for our staff, for medication, food, water and electricity, school fees for our children and we have to finance every cent purely through donations.

Find out more about the Blessed Gérard Hospice.

Pages: 1 2

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