

Regina Mundi celebrates ARV launch with message of care and hope

By Sydney Duval

Regina Mundi Church in Soweto, where the struggle against apartheid was given a courageous spiritual voice, has hosted the launch of a new struggle initiated by the Catholic Church.

Some 10 000 people gathered in and outside the church on 30 January to celebrate a mass uniting three major efforts: the Catholic Church Confronting the Stigma of HIV and celebrating Communities of Care; the Church launching its antiretroviral (ARV) programmes at 22 sites in Southern Africa; and the Church celebrating the Year of the Bible in Africa and the Eucharist.

Also present among the laity, clergy and religious were 30 bishops reaching the end of their Plenary Session at St Peter's Seminary, Garsfontein, and the papal nuncio, Archbishop Blasco Francisco Collaço.

The congregation roared agreement with the significance of the celebration when Archbishop Buti Tlhagale OMI, Bishop of the host Diocese of Johannesburg, noting the large, colourful and spirited turnout, said: "The days when Soweto and other places were no-go areas are long over."

The mass included the "Rite of Anointing of the Sick and praying for caregivers" which brought a tearful response among those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS - and among those near enough to witness a profoundly moving experience giving new impetus and depth to hope in a time of crisis and pandemic, of dying, loss and grief.

The rite involved 15 persons living with HIV sitting with representative groups of caregivers - nurses, traditional healers, doctors and home-based caregivers. Several bishops, each carrying a horn filled with the Oil of the Sick, then administered the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to the 15 living with HIV who "represented many other people, some of them in this church, some of them not necessarily here today".

The bishops then prayed for the caregivers who were presented with booklets containing the Gospel of Luke "which is often called the Gospel of healing".

Cardinal Wilfrid Napier OFM, Archbishop of Durban and president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, linked the past with the present in his homily as principal celebrant, saying: "Today we are doing once again what had become a custom during the days of apartheid. We are coming to visit our brothers and sisters who need to hear about, to see for themselves, but especially to experience the loving care and compassion of Christ Our Lord for those who are suffering in anyway, and that loving care and compassion of Jesus brought by his church.

"In the days of the struggle our main purpose was to comfort, strengthen and above all to give hope to those who were victims of that evil system ... going among the suffering as a witness to the country and to the world that we cared about what the government of that day was doing against its own people."

He described the visits as a call to conscience - to themselves, their fellow countrymen, their countrymen in a position to change the situation, to the world and to countries with influence over the South African government to speed up the end of the oppression and conflict ...to adopt a democratic system that would treat all people with equal dignity, respect and justice.

“Today we come among you to celebrate and to recognise those women and men who care about and are looking after those who are suffering under the new oppression, a new devastation, the oppression of HIV and AIDS; that oppression is affecting millions of people, either because they themselves are infected or are affected because some of their family members are in that situation,” Cardinal Napier said.

“We have come here among you who are suffering to witness to our country and to the world that we care. And because we care we call for the kind of political will that will deal honestly and resolutely with the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. We want to go from here with the same message of hope and determination to deal with the root causes of the disease - the abandoning of the basic moral laws, in particular God’s law that sex is for marriage and for bringing new life into this world in the family. In other words we need to go from here with the very clear message of abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage.”

In celebrating the Communities of Care, the Catholic Church was calling for a clear voice from government, as was the case in Uganda, to tackle the root cause of the wildfire spread of HIV by the simple strategy of a change of behaviour - “that we return to the values and customs of our faith and our culture that have kept these kinds of diseases away from us in the past”.

Referring to the day’s Readings and Gospel, Cardinal Napier said: “A change of behaviour is ultimately the only 100 percent sure way of stopping HIV/AIDS.”

Sr Alison Munro OP, representing the SACBC AIDS Desk, told the congregation of the uphill battle to put the ARV programme in place.

She said: “We are very proud today to launch the ARV programme of the conference in its three member countries in Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland. Over the last roughly 18 months we have worked very hard to access funding to be able to put the ARV treatment in place. With the help of President Bush’s PEPFAR initiative, the Ford Foundation and Dutch Catholic organisation Cordaid we have been able to begin treatment in 22 places in Southern Africa.

“We believe that every person present here today and in the wider church throughout Southern Africa has a role to play. We need to continue to support people living with HIV/AIDS and not ostracise them or stigmatise them.”

Sr Alison spoke of the wonderful stories coming out of the different diocesan programmes - children going to school for the first time because they were on treatment, men and women going back to work because they were no longer dying, people being able to look after their own families rather than have others taking care of their children - the success stories went on and on.

She described the mass as “a celebration of our faith, of what we are doing to live out that faith in practice in our daily lives”.