

## The world seen from Rome

<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/justice-and-peace-council-on-church-s-commitment-to-ebola-response>

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### **Justice and Peace Council on Church's Commitment to Ebola Response**



**"The Church has unique capacity and mandate to attend to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those who are sick and suffering"**

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Here is a document published today by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, regarding the Church's response to the Ebola virus.

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#### *Expanding the Catholic Church's Commitment to the Ebola Emergency Response*

##### **Introduction**

Ebola is an unprecedented epidemic causing untold suffering and death among the people in Coastal West Africa. Accompanying this grave epidemic has been great fear experienced by the people infected and those loved ones affected by this illness, and by the general population.

In Coastal West Africa, cases of Ebola occurred in December 2013, but this situation was not recognized as an outbreak until several months later. As of November 2014, approximately 15,000 infections have been registered, with 5,000 persons having died of the disease. Previously, during the past thirty-five years since Ebola was first identified, only 2,500 people had been infected with this virus. Global leaders, respective governments, public health experts, society-at-large, and the Church all are struggling to respond appropriately to both the scale and rapid advance of this epidemic.

Although the statistics released by the World Health Organization indicate some decreases in the rate of new infections in Liberia, there also have been increases in new infections in some parts of Sierra Leone. This indicates that the disease spread changes very rapidly. It is important to note, however, that the impact of Ebola will continue to cause grave challenges to the most affected area long into the future and, therefore, the need for international solidarity and support remains acute.

##### **The Role of the Church in Response to this Crisis:**

The Church is present in local communities; does not come and go; people turn to the Lord in time of fear and need. The Church is a visible witness to the presence of Jesus Christ at all times but particularly at times of adversity.

Through the centuries, the Church has worked to strengthen local communities so that people of all backgrounds could enjoy the dignity that God has instilled in each and every person and so that they might have life and have it to the full. In this regard, the Church is a trusted institution.

The Church is grateful for the efforts of the international community, especially as governments, and society-at-large mobilize much-needed resources to offer in solidarity with those in the heavily-affected countries. These efforts have facilitated, for example, diagnostic tools, specialized Ebola treatment units for those already sick with the disease, research for effective medicine and for a vaccine to prevent future outbreaks of this epidemic.

### **Health Response**

The Church has been providing health care for decades in this region and is an essential part of the overall health care infrastructure. The health care system has been overwhelmed by this epidemic and already had been facing grave challenges as a result of years of armed conflict, social unrest, and abject poverty.

Since health care workers are particularly vulnerable to infection with Ebola in the course of providing care for patients, we have seen the tragic impact of this epidemic within such institutions of the Church. The hospitals of the Brothers of St. John of God, for example, have experienced transmission of the virus in the course of providing care for patients and the deaths of physicians, nurses, and other professionals among whom were clergy, men and women religious and lay staff. In addition, other Catholic health care facilities were forced to close or severely limit needed care within the communities where they serve.

While governments, inter-governmental agencies, and international aid agencies are specifically supporting Ebola treatment in the affected countries, the Church's health facilities are addressing the health care needs of the general population. In order to do this, there is a need to strengthen the health care clinics, centres and hospitals of the Catholic Church. The needs include: Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), essential medicines, training, staff, and other means of financial and technical support. These efforts will contribute to the overall strength of these health care programmes long into the future, even after the present outbreak has been eliminated.

### **Pastoral Response**

The Church has unique capacity and mandate to attend to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those who are sick and suffering. Some in the Church are called to serve as "doctors of the body" but others receive the call to serve as "doctors of the soul". "Brotherly sharing with the sick opens us to the true beauty of human life, including its fragility, helping us to recognize the dignity and the value of every human being, in whatever condition he or she may find himself, from conception to death.<sup>1</sup>" This sharing includes prayer and spiritual counselling and administration of the sacraments. While public health regulations may prevent the minister from direct touch of Ebola patients, we should not avoid contact with such persons and must offer our spiritual closeness in ways that will bring them and their family members comfort and hope.

Both pastoral ministers and laity can contribute greatly to the prevention of stigma and discrimination in families, neighbourhoods, and in local faith communities. Those who are ill, especially those found to be infected with Ebola, their family members and other loved ones, their caregivers, as well as those who have recovered, can easily become victims of rejection, blame, and abandonment. It is the responsibility of priests and other pastoral caregivers to challenge such behaviour and to recall the basic religious teachings in this regard. In response to the challenge of Ebola, it is the role of the Church to preserve and foster hope in the midst of fear and abandonment.

### **Community Response**

As Pope Benedict XVI said in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "Following the example given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick ..." He further affirmed: "The Church's charitable organizations ought to do everything in their power to provide the resources and above all the personnel needed for this work."<sup>2</sup>

The Church is already present in most parts of the world, even before emergencies strike; it works through its Episcopal Conferences, dioceses, parishes, Caritas, religious congregations of Sisters, Priests, and Brothers, as well as with organizations and movements of the Catholic laity to bring comfort, solace, and a wide range of health and social services to populations facing large-scale emergencies and to accompany them with longer-term development.

The local Church in the region, accompanied by solidarity efforts from the Church Universal, already has been engaged to the full extent of its capacity. It has contributed to services provided in Catholic health facilities, advocated for greater support from national and local governments and from the international community, initiated community education and volunteer programmes, provided material and pastoral assistance to those in need, accompanied families and neighbours as they mourn those who have died, and helped to reintegrate those who have recovered from the disease. The Church's work at community level is centred in the parish, for "the parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration."<sup>3</sup>

With specific regard to the situation of Ebola, community outreach, much of it centred in the local parishes, is a most important means to provide education to prevent the further spread of the virus. Such education reaches down to the household level to help people understand that key changes in behaviour are necessary in order to avoid contact with body fluids of sick relatives and even the bodies of those who already have died. In many places, these prevention measures have been responsible for changing the course of the epidemic.

Another key aspect of the parish contribution to the Ebola response is the fact that this is seen as a trusted institution in local communities – a place where direct, honest, and credible information is transmitted to parishioners.

Catholic schools provide education and support to families and communities throughout the many dioceses of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. "... The Catholic school has continued to share responsibility for the social and cultural development of the different communities and peoples to which it belongs, participating in their joys and hopes, their sufferings and difficulties, their efforts to achieve genuine human and communitarian progress."<sup>4</sup> In the countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone, schools have been closed for many months. Reopening the schools is a high priority for communities most affected by the epidemic. Such decisions should be made in consultation with the appropriate government ministries with due attention to public health considerations. Before Catholic schools can be re-opened, adequate training and support will be necessary for teachers and other staff members.

### **The Universal Church Commits to an Enhanced Response to Ebola**

The Catholic Church engagement in response to the health crisis caused by Ebola has been significant. The actions of the local churches have been immediate and tireless, as described above. Local resources, in terms of financial investment, goods and human services, as well as volunteer response were immediate and continue without interruption.

The solidarity of the Universal Church with our sisters and brothers in the highly affected and neighbouring countries has been demonstrated by such efforts as mentioned below and by many others:

Caritas Internationalis has coordinated Emergency Appeals in:

Caritas Guinea - 2 phases

Caritas Sierra Leone - 2nd phase in preparation

Caritas Liberia

These appeals are focused mainly on social education and mobilization through parish and local community structures but also include training of clergy and other pastoral workers.

In addition, some Caritas member organizations, including Catholic Relief Services of the USA are supporting Catholic health programmes in the most affected countries.

Preparedness training and strategic planning have been undertaken by Caritas organizations in the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Chad, Togo, Senegal.

- Religious congregations and their affiliated lay organizations, as well as Catholic lay movements have raised funds and sent volunteers to address the needs of health structures sponsored by them as well such special needs as orphan care and community mobilization and education.

- Other Catholic Church-inspired organizations, including Misereor (Germany), Medical Mission Institute (Germany), and Missio Austria are seeking governmental and non-governmental funding to address the needs of Church-organized health structures in the most affected and neighbouring countries.

Sensitive to the increasing demands resulting from the Ebola epidemic, the Catholic Church, in conformity with its mission of service, commits to promote and implement an enhanced response to this urgent health crisis. This will require increased financial and human resources. In keeping with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, assistance will be provided to the local churches and their institutions so that this aid can effectively reach those who are most in need.

While affirming the efforts already being demonstrated through a wide range of Church-inspired activities and encouraging additional initiatives along these lines, the Holy See would like to offer its own commitments and recommendations for an enhanced response to Ebola. This will be fulfilled in the following ways:

**- Financial support to strengthen the following<sup>5</sup>:**

#### **Church-related health structures**

This funding will support, *inter alia*, the following to enhance health care, as well as prevention of transmission of Ebola among staff and other patients:

- Protective supplies
- Medications
- Building changes
- Personnel
- Transport vehicles for patients

Community Response

This funding will be used to:

- train parishioners and residents of local communities on the behavioural changes necessary to stop the spread of Ebola;
- provide food and hygiene kits at household level support families who are under observation for possible infection with Ebola to access adequate nutrition and other essential needs
- support orphans and other children and families with special needs
- support the re-opening of Catholic schools

### **Pastoral Response**

This funding will be used to:

- train and support clergy, Religious, lay pastoral workers, and catechists so that they in turn can train parishioners and
- local community residents
- develop training materials
- **Volunteer medical, psycho-social and other technical assistance**

The Holy See recognizes the urgent need for clergy, religious, and laity from around the world to accompany the local church in its response to this crisis by offering their time and expertise in the affected countries and in their home countries as well.

### **- Formation of Catholic Networks of Solidarity for the Ebola Emergency**

The activities undertaken to date have yielded positive lessons and have identified ongoing challenges in our response to Ebola. Thus Church-related organizations can benefit enormously to share effective responses and to discern solutions for difficulties encountered. This type of "networking" is most important at the local level in the countries most affected and in the region as a whole. Such sharing also could benefit national Episcopal Conferences and regional Episcopal Councils as they share policies and reflections on confronting this epidemic. At the global level, we encourage interactive discussions and planning among the Superiors General of the Religious Congregations, the international Catholic-inspired Organizations and Lay Movements in order to assure the best use of resources and expertise as we respond to the changing needs and dynamic nature of this epidemic.<sup>6</sup>

Rome, 27 November 2014

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1 Pope Francis, Address to a Congress of Oncological Surgeons, 11 April 2014, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-to-physicians-never-lose-sight-of-the-spiritu>

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #31a, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)

3 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, " #28,

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

4 Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School at the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Vatican City, 1997, #5,

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_27041998\\_school2000\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html)

5 This funding will be administered by Caritas Internationalis but will be available, on a Project request basis to national and diocesan Structures as well as to Religious Congregations and other Church-inspired organizations and movements.

6 At global level, Caritas Internationalis has been requested to facilitate this networking. At national level, the Episcopal Conferences could facilitate this exchange, and at diocesan level, the Bishop could provide for such facilitation.

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Il nuovo volto della Roma