

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Topic: HIV/AIDS in Black: Moving Beyond the Impasse  
 Convener: Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary College  
 Presenters: Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary College  
 Lilian Dube, University of San Francisco

This year's theme of the Catholic Theological Society of America, "Impasse... and Beyond," provided our Consultation with an opportunity to theologically engage the topic of HIV/AIDS in Black—on the continent of Africa and throughout the Diaspora.

Lilian Dube spoke first. Her presentation was entitled, "Black Catholic Theology in the Context of HIV & AIDS: Liberating Sexualities." Dube acknowledged the important contribution of Agbonkianmeche Orabator, a Jesuit priest from Kenya, whose work has explored the Church's mission in the time of HIV/AIDS, refugees, and poverty. Orabator's work also includes a theological analysis of pastoral letters and manuals of bishops from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Against this backdrop, Dube is able to imagine a Church that can take the world beyond the impasse of HIV/AIDS through the giftedness of the laity. Individual Catholic women and men found and maintain shelters for AIDS orphans and victims. Parishes minister to AIDS victims and their survivors physically and spiritually.

For the majority of Africans, HIV/AIDS is a devastating reality because they are affected and infected. Dube tells of her work in two AIDS clinics in December 2008. During this time, she was engulfed in a rollercoaster of emotions, as is captured in this last stanza of her poem, "The AIDS Clinic." "Haunted, By the youth of today, In dead silence, Huddled in verandas, Eyes streaming, Bony hands stretching, Hoping for life." It is noteworthy that Dube responded to her work at the AIDS clinics in verse, since Constance FitzGerald suggests in "Impasse and Dark Night" that strategies for moving beyond the impasse can be accessed through utilizing the intuitive side of the brain.

Shifting attention to the North American scene, Shawnee Daniels-Sykes presented on "The Legacy of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study to the HIV/AIDS Epidemic and Resurgence of Syphilis in Black America Today: Moving Beyond the Impasse." Daniels-Sykes explained that HIV/AIDS and syphilis persist at highly prevalent rates across the United States. She adds further that STDs like syphilis can cause higher incidences of HIV among African American women and men.

Turning then to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, Daniels-Sykes explained that the U.S. government misrepresented the terms of this non-therapeutic study for the 399 Black male participants with syphilis. This study, which was intended to last for six to nine months, actually lasted for forty years. Although the researchers told the participants that they were being treated for syphilis, "they were used, abused, and experimented upon as research subjects." Even when penicillin was discovered in 1943 and deemed an effective treatment and cure for syphilis, this antibiotic was withheld from the participants. The result was the death of many

participants and a legacy of mistrust that continues to persist in the African American community. This mistrust itself connotes impasse.

Statistically, disproportionately high rates of African Americans are infected with HIV/AIDS and syphilis, respectively. This situation is exacerbated by the economic disparity that continues to plague the African American community in the United States. The mistrust and conspiracy theories together with the grim statistics convey impasse. Daniels-Sykes maintains that despite African Americans' painful history with the health system, it is imperative that Black people move beyond this impasse so that they can grow in self-love, self-care, and self-esteem in the face of an infectious disease diagnosis.

Daniels-Sykes laid out the beginnings of what she calls a Black Catholic liberation bioethics. Turning to FitzGerald's article, "Impasse and Dark Night," Daniels-Sykes notes that the pain of human finitude can fruitfully be borne when individuals turn themselves over to the power of Jesus' spirit. This "turning over" opens up new vision and new understanding and creates the circumstances needed for personal and social transformation. Rooted in Sacred Scripture, particularly the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, and in Catholic Social Teaching, each expressive of *agape* love, a Black Catholic liberation bioethics can help to create a culture of life instead of a culture of death.

During the discussion that followed, audience members questioned how they might integrate what they heard into their scholarship and ministry. The presenters encouraged all to keep before themselves the link between spirituality and health and the need to presume a minimal knowledge base when engaging HIV/AIDS in Black. Despite the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and syphilis among persons of African ancestry, it must be asserted that these sexually transmitted diseases are not a Black problem or a gay problem. They are human problems!

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