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## **THE DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT ON HIV/AIDS**

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**by CARDINAL CLAUDIO HUMMES**

Mr. President,

First of all, on behalf of my delegation, let me express to you sincere appreciation for conducting this High-Level Plenary on HIV/AIDS, a most opportune initiative which expresses the international community's resolve to create more effective strategies in addressing the challenges posed by this epidemic and other preventable diseases, such as malaria, cholera and tuberculosis. My delegation wishes to pay tribute to the personal commitment of the Secretary General in the fight against HIV/AIDS and thank him for the comprehensive report on progress in implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS of the XXVI Special Session of this General Assembly.

HIV/AIDS has been and remains one of the major tragedies of our time. It is not only a health problem of enormous magnitude; it is a social, economic and political concern as well; and, as my delegation has already underlined a number of times here at the United Nations and in similar fora elsewhere, it is also a moral question, as the causes of the epidemic clearly reflect a serious crisis of values. Its rapid diffusion and tragic consequences have spared no geographic segment of the human family. More than 70 million people are expected to die of AIDS over the next 20 years. In 2001, on the occasion of the X General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Catholic Church, the Bishops from sub-Saharan Africa launched an appeal to the international community for urgent help in their battle against this plague that "is reaping a fearful harvest of death" in that region. In fact, a large majority of those have died and of those expected to die of AIDS, as well as of those who are infected with the virus, are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Allow me to draw special attention to one of the most vulnerable groups of HIV/AIDS victims, namely our children. So many of them have been and continue to be victims of this epidemic, either because they have been infected by the virus passed on to them by birth, or because they have become orphans due to AIDS-related premature death of their parents. HIV/AIDS is causing a sharp increase in child mortality: 3.8 million of the 19 million who died of AIDS last year were children under the age of 15. During the last two decades it has left over 14 million orphans, more than 11 million of whom are in sub-Saharan Africa. And, according to one estimate, by 2010 in Africa alone there will be 40 million AIDS orphans, 95% of whom carrying the virus.

The urgent need for treatment for these young patients can be met by the advances in medical

science. Unfortunately, the cost of medical treatment is high and often beyond the reach not only of the poor, but even of those in the middle income bracket. This economic problem is compounded by legal issues, such as contentious interpretations of the right to intellectual property. My delegation is heartened by the WTO [World Trade Organization] agreement reached last 30 August 2003, which will make it easier for poorer States to import cheaper generic pharmaceuticals made under compulsory licensing. This agreement should give these young patients greater access to medicines. We dare to hope that more concrete expressions of political will and moral courage like this would soon follow. But the HIV/AIDS sufferers do not only turn to pharmaceutical companies for help; their appeal for political will and moral courage is addressed above all to the whole international community. Indeed, while there are only few investors in the pharmaceutical firms which can provide the medicines these young patients direly need, all of us C as individuals and as community C must be investors in the noble cause of protecting the children and the young from HIV/AIDS infection and rescuing those who already carry the virus, because they are the future of the human race.

Mr. President,

The Holy See and the Catholic institutions have not shrunk from the global fight against HIV/AIDS. My delegation is pleased to note that 12% of care providers for HIV/AIDS patients are agencies of the Catholic Church and 13% of the global relief for those affected by the epidemic comes from Catholic non-governmental organizations. The Holy See, thanks to its institutions worldwide, provides 25% of the total care given to HIV/AIDS victims, placing itself among the leading advocates in the field, in particular among the most ubiquitous and best providers of care for the victims.

In fact, within this year, through the Pontifical Council for Health Care and various Catholic organizations, the Holy See will have reached its objective of having operational institutions and programs in all the sub-Saharan African countries, and of starting new ones in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Thailand and Lithuania, in addition to those already existing in other countries worldwide. They offer wide-ranging services, from awareness campaigns to education towards responsible behavior, from counseling to moral support, from nutrition centers to orphanages, from hospital treatment to home and prison care for HIV/AIDS patients.

Moreover, in order to coordinate better its activities the Holy See has established an Ad Hoc Committee on the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Committee intends to express particular solicitude for sub-Saharan Africa, where the suffering is most acute, and to pay special attention to the problems of stigma and discrimination accompanying the disease, to access to treatment and care, to education on responsible sexual behavior C including abstinence and marital fidelity C and to the care of HIV/AIDS orphans. With these new initiatives, the Holy See intends to strengthen further its commitment and augment its contribution to the global fight against HIV/AIDS, as it reaffirms its belief in the value and sacredness of every human life.

In closing, let me reiterate the willingness of the Holy See to cooperate with the rest of the international community in combating this scourge of the century, in mitigating its devastating impact at present, in arresting its menacing specter cast across the globe from claiming future generations. We cannot possibly fail to rise to this daunting challenge.

Thank you, Mr. President.