

## **Pope highlights HIV-AIDS in visit to Mozambique hospital**

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Pope Francis on Friday (September 6), his final day in Mozambique, visited a hospital on the outskirts of Maputo which treats HIV-AIDS-infected mothers and their children.

***Pope Francis kisses a baby at Zimpeto hospital on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique Sept. 6, 2019.***

**Maputo:** Pope Francis wrapped up his visit to Mozambique on Friday by consoling HIV-infected mothers and children at a Catholic Church-run hospital in one of the countries hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic, saying they were a sign of hope for all those who need help.

The Zimpeto Hospital is the latest to be opened by the Sant'Egidio community, a Rome-based charity that helped broker Mozambique's 1992 peace accord and then launched a comprehensive AIDS initiative to provide antiretroviral therapy to infected Mozambicans. Since its 2002 launch, the project has treated some 200,000 people.

Many of them are pregnant women who receive therapy to prevent transmission to their unborn children. According to UNAIDS and the World Health Organization, sub-Saharan Africa remains the most severely affected region for HIV, with 1 in 25 adults living with the virus that causes AIDS.

In his remarks at the hospital, Francis praised the willingness of the hospital staff to embrace a seemingly impossible task.

"This center shows us that there are always people ready to stop and show compassion, who do not yield to the temptation to say 'There is nothing to be done' or 'It's impossible to fight this scourge,'" he said. "Instead, you have set about finding solutions. You have heeded the silent, almost inaudible, cry of countless women, so many of them living in shame, marginalized and judged by all."

He urged staff and patients alike to keep hope alive, and always be willing to reach out to someone in need. "Having emerged from the nightmare of suffering, and without concealing their condition, they are now a sign of hope for many people," Francis said of those treated for HIV. "Their willingness to dream can serve as an inspiration to many people lying by the wayside who need a welcoming hand."

According to UNAIDS, in 2018 2.2 million people were living with HIV in Mozambique, 60 percent of them women. UNAIDS says there has been progress in both AIDS-related deaths and new infections in Mozambique since 2010. Even so, 150,000 people were newly infected last year, while 54,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses.

The Catholic Church has poured tremendous resources into HIV-AIDS treatment programs across Africa. But AIDS activists still fault the church for its refusal to emphasize condom use as a way to prevent transmission. Church teaching rejects the use of condoms as part of its overall teaching against artificial contraception. Senior Vatican officials have long advocated fidelity in marriage and abstinence from premarital sex as key weapons in the fight against AIDS.

Retired Pope Benedict XVI reignited a firestorm over the issue in 2009 when, during his first trip to Africa, he said condoms only made the AIDS epidemic worse. Francis visited the Zimpeto hospital before celebrating a final Mass in Maputo at a giant sports stadium. He flies later Friday to Madagascar for the second leg of his week-long trip to Africa.

- AP