

THE IRISH AID ANNUAL PROFESSOR FATHER
MICHAEL J. KELLY LECTURE ON
HIV AND AIDS
SOLIDARITY IN THE FACE OF HIV AT A TIME OF GLOBAL CRISIS

1st December 2020, 12:00-14:00 Irish Time (GMT)

Professor Father Michael J. Kelly
Written Address 2020

Good day to all of you and greetings to everyone who is linking up with us for today's **Irish Aid** HIV lecture.

That we cannot gather together for this annual event, as we did in previous years, but must hold it online can be laid squarely at the door of the global COVID pandemic. In many respects this is a loss, since we will miss out on personal interaction with the speakers and with one another, not to mention the solidarity in face of a common crisis that being physically together can generate.

But it is a gain in the opportunity it gives to listen to speakers from different parts of the world. It is only because we are online that we can hear from **Dr. Lia Tadesse**, Ethiopia's distinguished Minister of Health, and draw on her wealth of experience in health-care leadership. Being online also enables us to hear from **Saidy Brown**, an HIV activist from South Africa who was herself born with HIV.

The panellists today are **Marijke Wijnroks**, the Global Fund Chief of Staff from Switzerland, who has had extensive involvement in global health issues. And from nearer home, here in Ireland, we have **Ruairí de Búrca**, the Director General of Irish Aid at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

This year we also have the opportunity to experience the collaboration between two youth choirs, one from **Africaid Zvandiri in Zimbabwe**, the other the **SpeakUp SingOut or SUSO choir** from Ireland. Together these will launch an extraordinary video of solidarity through music across the miles separating Ireland and Zimbabwe. These young people will surely lift our hearts today and give us a taste of how we can all unite in solidarity in face of HIV in a time of global crisis.

None of this would have been possible were it not for the dedicated commitment of **Nadine Ferris France** and her colleagues in the **Irish Global Health Network**, who originated most of the ideas for today's session and who toiled away for months to bring these ideas to fruition. Thanks to them we can look forward to an instructive and enjoyable session, expertly moderated by: **Dil Wickremasinghe**, social justice and mental health advocate, campaigner, journalist and broadcaster.

We have already heard words of welcome from **Minister of State, Colm Brophy**. Allow me to thank the Minister for his encouraging and supportive words and for the Irish Government's continued support for this annual event. That there is need for Ireland to continue to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic is shown by the increase in new Irish HIV infections which are occurring at a rate higher than the European average – a very good reason for everybody throughout the country to show solidarity in face of the HIV epidemic.

Our speakers today form an exciting and very well-informed team who will surely enlighten us on the HIV/AIDS situation in a world that is plagued with other major crises. Hopefully when we have heard them speak, each one of us will feel stimulated to play a more energetic role in the global struggle against HIV, against COVID and against the other crises that beset today's world.

A few days ago, youth representatives in Cuba, in a tribute to Fidel Castro, stated that today "humans are experiencing an unprecedented multi-dimensional crisis". Let us briefly recall three of these dimensions – each a crisis that challenges us every day.

First, there are the ongoing interlinked crises of *environmental degradation* and *climate change*, the single greatest threat facing humanity, as Mr. Simon Coveney, Tánaiste at that time, pointed out a year ago, and which together are leading steadily to a world characterised by numerous turbulent weather events, to a hotter planet and to a more hungry world.



Then there is the continuing HIV and AIDS crisis which has already killed 32 million people and left 75 million more infected, with the total number of new infections in 2019 being more than three times higher than the target of 500,000 that the world had set for itself.

Finally, and as we are so well aware, there is the COVID crisis which so far has seen more than 50 million infections and one-and-a-quarter million deaths.

All of these are very severe crises closely interconnected with one another, each one increasing the potential of the others for disaster and human calamity. And each of them calling for the same response from every one of us as concerned human beings and inhabitants of this planet. All of them surely calling for each of us to speak out with one voice: **NO! Thus far you have come, but no further; you have reached your limit.** All of them calling for colossal solidarity in face of the immensity of the evil and wrong that they represent.

Recent extreme weather events highlight the damage we are doing to this beautiful world of ours by the way our factories, our industrial plant, our vehicles are flooding the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other gases, thereby increasing global temperatures and speeding up the rate of climate change.

We acknowledge the ongoing crisis of HIV and AIDS. Most certainly and very gladly, we salute the great progressive strides that have been made over the forty years since this disease first struck humanity. But at the same time we note with alarm that in certain regions of the world the epidemic is expanding; that nearly half the new HIV infections worldwide occur in people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men, sex workers and other key populations; and that these receive only a tiny part of the funding that goes into preventing and treating HIV infection. As we asserted two years ago at this annual HIV lecture, the policy and the strategy should be to leave no one behind. We re-affirm our commitment to that vision, pledging that each one of us will do what we can to make it a reality.

And we cannot be blind to the COVID crisis that has killed and traumatized so many people, that has kept so many of us locked up in our homes for weeks on end, that has played havoc with our social lives, that has brought so many shops and small businesses close to ruin, and that has had such a chilling effect on democracy and the observance of human rights. Over and over again, we say NO to this crisis and we have shown our heroic solidarity in saying NO by the way we have responded to the severe lockdown restrictions that almost imprisoned us in our homes a couple of times in the past year.

These various crises, individually and in combination with one another, have the potential to bring the world to its knees, as indeed the COVID crisis has already shown. The COVID pandemic, climate change and HIV occurrence are an unspeakably evil trio of catastrophes, each one increasing the risks from the other two. For instance, evidence from Lesotho shows that after periods of severe drought brought about by climate change, there is a rise in HIV rates, since getting the wherewithal to put food on the table becomes a higher priority than protecting oneself from HIV infection. Again, the World Health Organisation has warned that because of COVID-related service disruptions the supply of drugs for HIV prevention and treatment may be at risk, leading among other things to huge increases in new HIV infections among children.

But there is one force that these global crises cannot withstand and that is the force of our common determination not to let them bring us down. United we stand. It's an old expression, but one that is still full of powerful meaning. Let us stand together against these forces that are destroying our world. Let us, together, by our words and actions, resist with all our might these death-dealing crises of AIDS, COVID, environmental destruction and climate change. Let us cooperate to the full with those who are responding to HIV and AIDS, those who are dealing with various aspects of the COVID pandemic, those who are advocating for a cleaner and greener world. Let us show massive solidarity with all the actors in their struggle against HIV at this time when its impacts are being worsened by COVID, climate change and environmental degradation.

We are now coming closer to Christmas, the time of peace and good will across the world. Each one of the crises we have briefly considered works against such aspirations. Each one brings uncertainty, confusion, turmoil and disruption into the lives of individuals and into the lives of communities. Let us do everything we possibly can to reduce their impact on our lives and on the people living in our communities and across the whole world. Let us bond ourselves together to show solidarity in face of the evil they represent. And may the words we will be hearing from today's presenters, as well as the inspiration from the joint youth choirs, strengthen all of us in our determination to do just that.

Thank you and may God bless and enlighten you, make you strong, and keep you safe against HIV, COVID, environmental destruction and the harmful effects of climate change. Good day and may God be with you!

