A critical historical analysis of the South African Catholic Church's HIV/AIDS response between 2000 and 2005

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Abstract
The South African HIV and AIDS experience is unique in many ways considering the country's delayed and robust epidemic, the apartheid context, and successive HIV-denialist government regimes. While the struggle for democracy may have overshadowed the enormity of the unfolding HIV epidemic, there was also a delay in constructive religious responses to it early on. In 1990, HIV/AIDS was declared a Catholic institutional focus, and by 2000 the Church had established the largest system of care and treatment in the country besides that of the government. However, the Catholic Church suffered severe criticism on account of its anti-condom policy to HIV prevention. As a result, the institutional Church underwent both organisational and ideological changes in an attempt to adapt to the contextual challenges brought about by HIV and AIDS. Informed by archival collections and oral sources, this article endeavours to critically analyse the HIV/AIDS-related care and treatment activities of the Catholic Church in South Africa between 2000 and 2005. It argues that the complex interplay between HIV and AIDS, the controversy about condom use, and the availability of antiretroviral therapy, accompanied by church activists’ multiple engagements with these issues, changed the Church's institutional HIV/AIDS response at that time, in effect transforming the Catholic Church in South Africa into a substantial health asset and agent. However, its stance against the use of condoms for HIV prevention, informed by a larger religious tradition on sexuality, proved to be a health liability.