

Dioceses, religious orders mobilize to help AIDS victims

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — As the AIDS epidemic grows, Catholic attention to the crisis and church programs to help its victims are also growing.

Catholic bishops are fostering educational as well as service programs, especially in California, where a public campaign is under way to quarantine victims of AIDS — acquired immune deficiency syndrome — and deny them ordinary civil rights.

Recent Catholic efforts include an AIDS hot line just established in one California diocese, an ecumenical support program in another, and increasing programs for AIDS victims by Catholic-sponsored health care facilities.

In June, Mother Teresa of Calcutta asked President Reagan to help her Missionaries of Charity find land where they could establish a center for AIDS victims. She earlier made a similar request to Mayor Ed Koch of New York, where her sisters run a residence for AIDS sufferers.

"Let's not take it (AIDS) as a punishment but as a sign that God wants us to open our hearts and love one another," Mother Teresa said in a June speech in Washington to the National Council for International Health.

AIDS has no known cure yet. It kills its victims, usually in less than three years, by destroying the body's ability to fight other diseases.

As of July 14, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, 22,635 Americans had been diagnosed as having AIDS since the centers started collecting data in 1981. The centers reported that 12,422 of those, or 55 percent, had died.

The agency expects the number of diagnosed AIDS cases to reach 30,000 by the end of this year and 270,000 by 1991. If its projections are accurate and no cure is found, the centers expect about 180,000 more Americans to die from AIDS within the next five years.

Active Church involvement has taken on a special urgency because of claims by some people, including some religious figures, that AIDS is a form of divine vengeance for immorality. The allegation arises from the fact that homosexual relations and the sharing of hypodermic needles by drug users are the two most common ways the disease is transmitted.

"What is more contagious than AIDS is the bigotry and misinformation that surround it," said Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles at a press conference July 14. During the conference, the archbishop announced formation of a Los Angeles-area interreligious council, sponsored by 15 denominations, to support AIDS victims.

Archbishop Mahony, Episcopal Bishop Robert Rusack of Los Angeles and Rabbi Allen Freehling, president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, are co-chairmen of the council.

At the press conference they condemned a California referendum initiative on this fall's ballot. Backed by political extremist Lyndon LaRouche, the referendum aims to quarantine AIDS victims. "I believe that our interfaith alliance speaks out in total opposition to ... the so-called LaRouche initiative," Rabbi Freehling said.

The next day, Bishop Leo Maher of San Diego issued a similar statement, calling the proposal of the initiative "morally intolerable."

Bishop Phillip F. Straling of San Bernardino, Cal., in a letter distributed at weekend Masses throughout his diocese July 12-13, announced a diocesan program of AIDS education and assistance, including a 24-hour hot line. He assigned a member of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary order, Father Robert Powell, as program coordinator.

Bishop Straling urged Catholics to respond to AIDS sufferers "with compassion and unconditional love."

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"While the Church remains firm in her teachings against sexual activity between homosexuals whereby some victims may have contracted AIDS, we must continue to show concern and love for the person," he wrote.

Other recent Church actions for AIDS victims included:

- Archbishop James Hickey of Washington named Father John P. Gigrich as his special assistant for ministry to homosexual Catholics and archdiocesan coordinator of ministry to AIDS sufferers, beginning July 1.

- Kentucky state regulations were changed July 8 to allow AIDS victims to be placed in nursing homes. Last March the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth had wanted to admit some AIDS patients to their nursing home in Louisville. The home plans to begin admitting such patients as soon as it can fulfill procedural requirements of the new regulations.

- America, a Jesuit-run national magazine, dedicated its June 21-28 issue to pastoral aspects of the AIDS epidemic.

- Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco who wrote the lead article in the America issue on the Church and the AIDS crisis, also expanded his archdiocesan Catholic Social Service staff in June to

increase education about AIDS and direct service to AIDS victims in the San Francisco area. The archdiocese announced plans to begin remodeling an old convent in August, turning it into a residential care facility for persons with AIDS and other terminal illnesses.

- Bishop Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, leading a prayer service in his cathedral June 20 to draw attention to the AIDS crisis, urged people to treat AIDS victims with compassion, love and "solidarity with the terminally ill."

Last February, the Archdiocese of Detroit and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales established Wellness House in Detroit, the first residence in Michigan for persons dying of AIDS.

About the same time, Archbishop Mahony announced plans to establish a hospice in Los Angeles. Two months earlier Cardinal John O'Connor of New York provided financing and facilities for Mother Teresa to open a residence for AIDS victims in lower Manhattan.

Contributing to this story were Dan Pitre in San Bernardino, Kerry O'Rourke in Louisville, Sam Lucero in San Diego, Mark Zimmerman in Washington and Joseph McKenna in Cleveland.

Louisiana bishop bans gambling, calls it 'unworthy of our God'

By Louis G. Aguirre

Houma, La. (NC) — Bishop Warren L. Boudreaux of Houma-Thibodaux has ordered parishes and Catholic groups to stop using bingo games, gambling, fairs, and festivals as to raise funds. The bishop imposed a complete ban on such activities. The ban is to be phased in over the next 10 years.

In a letter to priests, the bishop termed gambling and other such fund-raising activities "unworthy of our God." He outlined a plan to forbid certain forms of gambling, including games of chance, after Dec. 1 of this year.

Furthermore, he stipulated, bingo, raffles, and keno, a gambling game resembling lotto,

will be banned as a means of church support after June 30, 1991. All church fairs and festivals must be discontinued by 1996.

The ban applies not only to parishes and Catholic schools but to all other Catholic organizations in the diocese. Not only will they be prohibited from engaging in gambling, but they also will be forbidden to accept money from any outside source "who uses any of the forbidden practices," the bishop said.

"I am convinced that we will never teach our people the stewardship of money as long as any of these means are used for the purpose of church support," the bishop stated in his July 1 letter. "But we must first convince ourselves that the stewardship of

money is a genuine theological principle and see gambling as a betrayal of that principle."

"I am aware that many will be upset and angered by these regulations," he acknowledged. "We simply have to accept the fact — a fact we accept in our own lives — that if we cannot afford something we simply cannot buy it. If we cannot pay for it, we simply cannot have it."

"Moreover," he added, "it seems to me unworthy of our God that we should have to use these means to support His gospel and His Church. More than that, it is unworthy of us as a people. We are better than that," he said. "We are much better than that. One wonders how we have tolerated it for so long."

In his letter, the bishop also advised "those who have relied upon these means of support to begin slacking off little by little before the deadline, so that the shock will not be too great when the end comes."

He offered the help of a financial adviser who will conduct meetings at the deanery level to provide advice on "the principles of stewardship and tithing" and on "how to organize on the parish level in order to raise the necessary funds to support the parish, the schools and all other Church institutions."

He concluded his letter by citing his belief "that God established this diocese in the bayou country for His special purpose: to build up a people holy and righteous in His sight."

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