

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



The AIDS epidemic

Only the meanest and most perverse of individuals could derive satisfaction from the current outbreak of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). For such people, this terrible epidemic is nothing less than an act of divine judgment against homosexuals: AIDS is fit punishment for immoral behavior.

Healthy people are appalled by such self-righteous and vindictive pronouncements. They think first of the afflicted person, not of the lifestyle that may have brought him to death's door.

According to a recent New York Times report, physicians who have treated AIDS victims say that virtually all of them, facing the certainty of death, respond with despair and sadness when the disease is diagnosed. Doctors note that the experience is especially stressful for Catholic clergymen and religious who, as homosexuals, have led a secret life and suddenly face not only death but the loss of their church position, religious identity and ecclesiastical support-system.

One would expect, of course, that Christians would be particularly sensitive to the pain and suffering of AIDS victims. The Gospel, after all, is a message of love, of forgiveness, of compassion and of mercy.

It is anomalous in the extreme, therefore, when church leaders take precisely the opposite course. This has happened in some religious communities from which AIDS victims have been summarily dismissed upon discovery of the disease.

According to the same New York Times report, a Houston physician treated three Catholic priests who died of AIDS. As soon as their ecclesiastical superiors learned on their illness, they were ostracized.

"They were ejected, just told to leave," the physician said. "I don't think they had any choice."

To be sure, the Catholic Church has reason to be nervous about the spread of AIDS within the ranks of the clergy and

religious. It reveals what many people outside the Church have always suspected: enforced celibacy cannot suppress human sexuality. In their minds, *The Thorn Birds* is more the rule than the exception.

But *The Thorn Birds* is about heterosexual love. The spread of AIDS to clergy and religious also reveals what many people inside the Church have always suspected: enforced celibacy attracts an inordinately large number of homosexuals, manifest and latent, to the priesthood and religious life.

A priest who counsels AIDS patients in San Francisco told The New York Times, "The church has no coherent policy on AIDS. AIDS will force us to take a closer look at sexuality and death and to be more aware of what God is saying in this age."

Will it? As we move closer to the 21st century, the Church has to ask itself how it expects to replenish its dwindling supply of ordained priests. Its present corps of priests is aging quickly. Although some remarkable young men continue to offer themselves for service in the presbyteral ministry, many more remarkable young men choose not to apply, or leave the seminary after entering.

Every pertinent survey shows that celibacy is the number one obstacle.

Other surveys disclose that the majority of Catholics would have no objection to a change in the current law. What they want are good priests, whether married or unmarried.

In the earliest centuries of the Church, of course, celibacy was not required. It is not required today in certain Eastern rites, and exceptions have been made even in the Latin rite for a number of former Episcopal priests.

By all means, compassion and caring are in order for AIDS victims. At the same time, however, we need "a closer look at sexuality" and a greater awareness of "what God is saying in this age."

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



'Amerika' critique

Q. Did you watch the TV series, *Amerika*?

A. Yes, the whole 14 hours. If it had not been for the intensive advertising a month ahead of time and the squabbles about whether it should or should not be shown — not to mention the greatly touted refusal of big advertisers, including Chrysler — I don't think it would have had such a large viewing audience. People are attracted by contention.

Q. Then you didn't like it?
A. Hang on. I didn't say that. Actually there was much about the series that was thought-provoking, but many things discouraged sustained viewing.

Q. What would have discouraged viewers?
A. 1) The length — 14 hours spread over a week. Not many people are willing to follow through when a series is that long, especially since viewers have a choice of many programs. The Miss America pageant, for example, out-drew *Amerika* on the third night.

2) The series was so complicated that it was hard to follow.
3) The dialogue was often spoken so softly that one would need super-hearing to understand it.

4) The long silences were very disconcerting. American viewers like action.

Q. Then you didn't like the series?
A. I think it had much value. The purpose of the series was to alert our people to the possibility of a nation becoming so apathetic about its freedom and traditions that they can be lost, with a result similar to that in Orwell's *1984*. Has this happened in the United States? Partially, yes.

1) In our national elections, a great percentage of Americans don't bother to vote.

2) More than a million babies are destroyed every year by abortions blessed by the civil law and supported by many Americans.

3) Elderly people are afraid to go out at night, and our churches are locked during the day, helpless against goons — another deprivation of our liberties.

4) Millions are involved in alcohol and drug abuse.

5) Sexual extravagances and perversion are rampant, as are AIDS and the amorality of such TV programs as sexologist Dr. Ruth's, which proclaims the gospel of self-indulgence and demand for condoms. Few people today clamor for purity and self-control.

6) Even some theologians water down morality to make it acceptable, condoning men's weaknesses rather than proclaiming Christ crucified.

Q. Then you feel there is no hope?
A. Not at all. On the positive side, we have Pope John Paul II, who bluntly proclaims Christ's doctrine in faith and morals, and who has millions of loyal followers. For all the weaknesses in our country there are great strengths: millions of family-oriented people, living normal virtuous lives. We all know many fine civil servants: in government, in the military, in the post office, in industry and labor. We have dedicated professionals, both men and women: doctors, educators, technicians, economists, laborers. We have mothers who are devoted homemakers, and faithful father whose lives center on their families. There is much on the positive side.

Q. What do you conclude about *Amerika*?

A. The specific intention of shaking Americans from apathy and jolting us into jealously guarding our inheritance was well-taken. One night, I watched a Rochester TV program that featured four local panelists, including a sharp Mr. Periotti, a Mr. Urbanski of the Rochester Teachers' Union and a small but impressive studio audience. I was stricken by the fact that a woman from the Ukraine, a refugee from Afghanistan and a man from Poland — all of whom had experienced Soviet oppression in their homelands — were unanimous in concluding that the points presented by *Amerika* were well-taken. Had there been a Hungarian, a Latvian and a Slovak, I think each would have shared the same opinion.

Liberty cannot be preserved by self-indulgence or without sacrifice. This goes for the individual citizen as well as the whole nation.

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