

National/International Report

Archbishop announces AIDS death of Washington priest

By Mark Zimmermann and Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — In an unprecedented action, Archbishop James Hickey of Washington announced April 10 that one of his priests had died of AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The priest, who died the previous day, was 44-year-old Father Michael Peterson, a psychiatrist noted for helping priests and nuns who had drug dependency and sexual problems.

The announcement marked the first case in the United States in which a priest's death from AIDS was publicized by his bishop.

Father Peterson was founder and director of St. Luke's, Institute in Suitland, Maryland, a Washington suburb. The institute treats priests, brothers and nuns from across the country.

"His tragic death is a reminder to us of the personal and human dimensions of this growing epidemic," Archbishop Hickey told reporters. He said Father Peterson had agreed before his death that the cause of death would be made public.

A month before he died, Father Peterson wrote — with the archbishop's encouragement — to all the priests of the Washington Archdiocese and to bishops across the country who had sent priests to his institute, informing them confidentially that he was dying of AIDS. He asked their prayers.

In his letter to bishops, Father Peterson wrote, "I hope that in my own struggle with this disease, in finally acknowledging that I have this lethal syndrome, there might come some measure of compassion, understanding and healing for me and for others with it — especially those who face this disease alone and in fear."

Archbishop Hickey told reporters he did not know how Father Peterson contracted AIDS and had not tried to find out. He said when the priest told him the nature of his illness at the end of February, his sole

concern was to "reach out" with "support, prayers and assistance, as his bishop, as his friend and his brother in the Lord."

AIDS is contracted by exchanging bodily fluids with a person who carries the disease. Because the most common forms of transmission are homosexual relations and the sharing of needles for intravenous drug use, AIDS-related deaths of priests have usually been shrouded in secrecy.

Recent research by National Catholic News Service indicated that at least 20 Catholic priests and brothers throughout the nation have died of AIDS, although the names of victims have become public in only a handful of cases.

Father Peterson "feared his illness might be used in a sensational way to undermine his work or to attack the Church that he served," Archbishop Hickey said.

"What is most important," he added, "is not how he died, but how he served" the hundreds of alcoholic, chemical-dependent or sexually disturbed priests, brothers and nuns who found help at St. Luke's Institute.

The archbishop said he encouraged the dying priest to let brother priests and bishops know because "the worst part of it (dying of AIDS) is the isolation."

"I shared with him my conviction that the truth about his illness would bring forth support and compassion, not judgment and rejection," the archbishop said. Archbishop Hickey reportedly visited Father Peterson almost every day in his final month of life.

In his March 9 letter telling the priests of the Washington Archdiocese that he had AIDS, Father Peterson wrote, "For 11 months I have struggled, with the help of the Eucharist and my own ever deepening faith and knowledge, that at my death I will meet him (God) in the love that he has promised through the life, death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ."

The response from bishops and priests to Father Peterson's letters was an "immediate

and overwhelming outpouring of support," Archbishop Hickey said.

Six bishops and about 150 priests celebrated Father Peterson's funeral Mass April 13 at St. Matthew's Cathedral. Several hundred others gathered for the midafternoon Mass, including his parents.

tion, he had received his medical degree from the University of California medical school in San Francisco and worked as a researcher at the Food and Drug Administration in Washington and at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md.

In 1975 he decided to study for the

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The late Father Michael Peterson, in a March letter to U.S. bishops

Archbishop Hickey, the chief celebrant, said at the close of the Mass that Father Peterson was "a brilliant and hard-working priest" who "combined the skills of a physician, the training of a psychiatrist and the caring of a pastor in ministering to the special needs of troubled priests and Religious."

"Hundreds of priests and religious have lost a skillful counselor and caring pastor ... Our own lives, our Church and our community are diminished by the death of Father Peterson," he said.

Father Peterson, a native of Seattle, converted to Catholicism at age 19. A professional psychiatrist before his ordina-

priesthood, and in 1978 he was ordained. A short time later he established St. Luke's Institute, which quickly gained a national reputation in Church circles for effective treatment of priests and nuns facing chemical addiction or sexual problems. It grew to a staff of 60, treating 32 inpatients at a time and many more on an outpatient basis.

Archbishop Hickey said he hoped Father Peterson's decision to reveal that he had AIDS would help others with the disease become more open about it.

"Everyone has a right to privacy," he said, but "I believe that when someone is ill, it's far better to speak up about it."

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