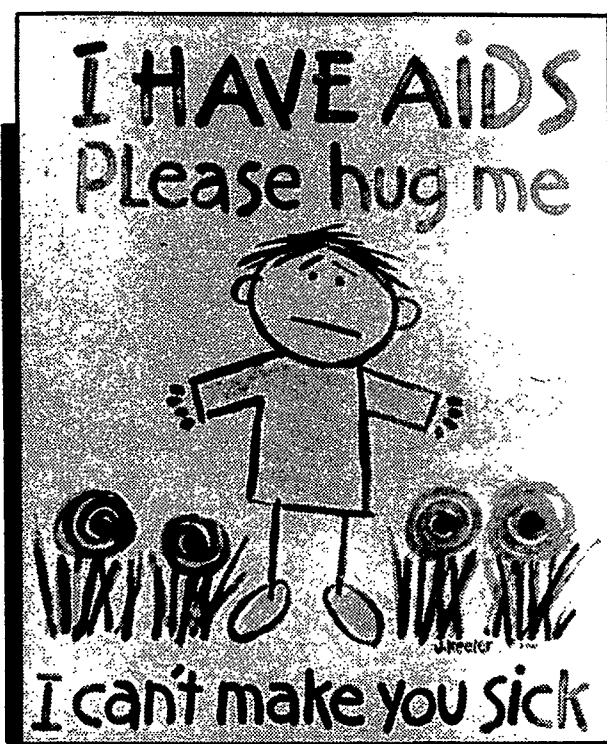




AIDS

How Should Catholics Respond to the Tragic Plight of Society's Lepers?

Respect
Life

By REV. JOHN F. HARVEY, O.S.F.S.

The AIDS epidemic is grim. The director of the World Health Organization, Dr. Hayden Mahler, says he could not imagine a worse health problem in this century: "I don't know of any greater killer than AIDS, not to speak of its psychological, social and economic maiming. Everything is getting worse and worse in AIDS and all of us have been underestimating it (*Washington Post*, Feb. 2).

Dr. Mahler fears that 100 million people could be infected with the AIDS virus in the next five years.

Dr. William Grace of St. Vincent's Hospital in New York holds that AIDS will devastate the American medical system. In 1985, 12,000 patients with AIDS cost America \$6 billion. If in five years there are even a quarter of a million cases in the United States, the costs will be astronomical.

It is therefore necessary to become aware of the crisis lying immediately before us and to ask ourselves what we personally can do about it.

No Time for Moralizing

I can anticipate an objection which I have often heard when explaining our moral obligation to help the victims of AIDS: "If people have AIDS it is their own fault — the result of homosexual promiscuity or intravenous (IV) drug abuse."

In response to this attitude, I would note first of all that there are many innocent victims of AIDS — children, innocent wives of bisexual or homosexual men, and hemophiliacs, for example. In addition, many homosexual men and many IV drug abusers are compulsive. They have *lost control* over their sexual activity or their use of drugs. This does not mean they are without responsibility, but their responsibility for their actions is considerably reduced.

It is not a time for moralizing. It is a time for compassion, for guidance concerning the person's future, for practical suggestions concerning medical aid and, at the right time, for reflection on the spiritual meaning of AIDS.

We had best leave the question of personal responsibility in the Lord's hands. Instead, we should show each person how God's loving care is present in his life. AIDS patients are persons of inestimable worth and

redeemed by Christ.

Love for Persons With AIDS

Sincere love for the AIDS patient will be expressed in various practical ways. In my work in New York City with Courage, a spiritual support group for Catholic homosexuals, I have visited several of our members who were dying of AIDS. I came to understand the meaning of such visits. One listens. As one avoids harsh judgments one also avoids the other extreme of telling the AIDS patient that he is *in no way* responsible for having AIDS. While this may be true of some children, hemophiliacs and the wives of bisexual men, it is generally *not* true of active homosexuals or IV drug abusers. Many AIDS patients are overwhelmed with guilt, self-hatred, despair and suicidal thoughts. They feel abandoned and cut off from society.

Programs of Care

Among the measures which the Church can support are hospices for AIDS patients. The reality of AIDS is that we will need many more hospices as more persons contract this virus. Some dioceses have anticipated this need. The Diocese of Tulsa, for example, recently opened a hospice funded by gifts from Catholic churches. In Los Angeles, several hospices have been opened by Catholic lay people supported by private donations.

Dioceses can also develop policies to protect persons with AIDS from discrimination in the workplace. The bishops of New Jersey issued guidelines in June 1987 outlining the Church's responsibilities in the areas of employment, education, pastoral ministry and social services.

Unreasonable Fear

Diocesan educational programs must respond to the unreasonable fear of AIDS found not only among laity, but often among clergy as well. Many people fear that they can get AIDS from casual contact with anyone who is HIV-positive. All the studies show that the AIDS virus is communicated only through fluids, and particularly through blood and semen; not through handshaking or other forms of casual contact.

The Role of the Priest

What is the role of the priest in ministering to AIDS patients?

As already pointed out, many AIDS patients are compulsive. The person with AIDS should be treated with the same kindness that we render to anyone with an addiction. As with any other addict, he needs to be part of a spiritual support system. However, support systems dealing with AIDS are comparatively rare in our dioceses. In the Archdiocese of New York some members of Courage minister with AIDS patients. While these people avoid moralizing, they do not hesitate to respond to questions about the need of the AIDS patient to be reconciled with God and with the Church. The priest has an even better opportunity to prepare the AIDS patient for eternity.

Priests who want to help AIDS patients will benefit from the insight of Rev. John O'Connor, pastor of Mission Dolores in San Francisco. Writes Father O'Connor: "(Many AIDS patients) feel God is punishing them for their lifestyle. They think they brought AIDS on themselves."

"When I minister to people who feel this way, I help them interpret what has happened. God doesn't punish. But if we keep thumbing our noses at God's natural law we run the risk of paying for our action."

He notes that homosexual persons themselves bring up the question of divine punishment for AIDS. This is a theological question to which the teaching of St. Augustine is especially pertinent. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine states that every sin carries its own punishment which God allows but does not will positively.

It is also true, however, that sometimes God allows innocents to suffer from the sins of others. We have seen this in the case of AIDS contracted by persons involved in no moral wrongdoing.

In any case, God *allows* persons to suffer from AIDS. Even so, He will give them the grace to bear their suffering. His primary purpose for permitting suffering in this life is not to punish us, but to correct us, and to lead us on to authentic love, spiritual purification and growth.

Compassion and Responsibility

Coupled with merciful care for the AIDS patient must be a determination on the part of everyone to prevent further spread of

this dreadful virus. The patient has a personal obligation to tell his or her spouse. If about to undergo an operation he should inform his doctor or dentist. But ordinarily there is no moral obligation to tell an employer or landlord.

Those involved in health care should observe the regulations concerning use of gloves, gowns and other protective clothing. The visitor should avoid any fluid which may be potentially dangerous.

The Unreliability of Condoms

It is also important to understand the medical arguments concerning the unreliability of condoms in stopping the spread of AIDS. Doctors Eugene Diamond and James Goedert both argue that "there is no acceptable level of risk. The reduction of risk is a totally unsatisfactory goal" (*Fidelity*, Oct. 1987).

Dr. Helen Kaplan, in *The Real Truth About Women and AIDS*, says the advertising blitz about condoms has grossly misled many women into a false sense of assurance that they would not get AIDS if their sexual partners wore condoms.

The campaign promoting condoms as a cure-all is off the mark. Writes Joseph Sobran in *Human Life Review* (Fall 1987), "It amounts to improving the odds for those who play Russian Roulette. The game may be less risky, but it is just as deadly ..."

Training in sexual abstinence — for example, using the same Twelve Steps used with such effectiveness by Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups — is not considered. Challenging a person to the faithful practice of the Twelve Steps adapted from A.A.'s wisdom is a much better way of avoiding AIDS than any appeal to the false security of the condom.

We need to pray that God will give us a spirit of compassion for persons with AIDS and their families, and at the same time a spirit of courage to help us dissuade people from the kind of behavior which invites the virus into one's life.

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