



International crises

The killing of eight people — including six Jesuit priests — shocks the world; a Vatican conference on AIDS comes to a close. Pages 4-5.



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Disease evokes mixed messages

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Staff writer

A Rochester woman who describes herself as "a typical suburban housewife," Ann asked that her last name not be used.

So did Paul, a representative of Dignity-Integrity/Rochester, an organization of homosexual Catholics and Episcopalians.

Ann and Paul — both Catholics — prefer to remain anonymous because of the social stigma attached to their situations.

Identifying Paul might cause his peers to ostracize him because of his sexual orientation. Identifying Ann might cause her acquaintances to ostracize her out of fear of acquired immune deficiency syndrome — AIDS.

"I'm heterosexual. I used to run PTA, Brownies," remarked Ann, the mother of two Catholic high school students. Long alienated from the Catholic church because she divorced and remarried without benefit of annulment, Ann nonetheless strove to bring up her children in the Catholic Church.

It's a church to which Ann feels she can't turn for help in dealing with AIDS, which she contracted from a childhood sweetheart she began seeing after separating from her first husband. She learned she had AIDS in March, 1988.

"I can't tell you the guilt I felt," she said. "I felt so alone. I feel even more so now."

The teenagers who attend Catholic high school with Ann's children don't know their friends' mother has AIDS. In fact, from the stories her children tell her, none of their peers seems to have been touched by the disease.

"My daughter has told me of several (AIDS) jokes that have gone on around school," Ann said. "When my daughter goes to school and hears those jokes, do you know how that hurts her?"

What hurts Ann even more is the Catholic Church's stance on AIDS. She criticized church hierarchy for refusing to unreservedly condone the use of condoms to stem the spread of the virus, which is primarily transmitted by sexual intercourse or by contaminated needles used by intravenous drug users.

"I don't try to put (the Catholic Church) down," Ann said. "I just think it's time they caught up with the real world and they dealt with it."

In particular, she lamented statements made at the recent Vatican-sponsored AIDS conference in Rome, Nov. 13-15. According to Catholic News Service reports, "(d)uring the ... conference, numerous Catholic officials reiterated church moral opposition to the use of condoms."

At the same time, Pope John Paul II noted that people with AIDS "are entitled to receive adequate health care, respectful comprehension and complete solidarity, just like every other ailing person."

"Do not feel alone," he told people with AIDS. "The church is with you."

The church may be with them, but people with AIDS receive so many mixed messages that they don't know whether the church really believes its own rhetoric, according to diocesan Catholics who have dealt directly with the AIDS crisis.

Those who work with AIDS patients note that whenever it issues a statement on AIDS, the church makes sure to reiterate its opposition to homosexual behavior, artificial birth control and intravenous drug use — driving home a point people with AIDS see as condemning them.

"(Catholics) see what's happening with AIDS," Paul said. "Then they see these condemnation of those who are gay. People talk about not using condoms for protection. You start to wonder about those who make these pronouncements for the church. Are they informed about what they're talking about?"

Isaiah House, a home Rochester's Corpus Christi Church operates for the dying, has had two male AIDS patients as guests during the last year. Confronting the disease first hand can cause an orthodox Catholic to soften his or her position on how to deal with AIDS, Isaiah's staff members said.

"I'm no moral theologian," remarked Sister Margaret Golden, USC, a nurse with the home. "I just wonder about the whole thing ... Sometimes I think we go at these moral issues with a pair of tweezers."

Sister Golden emphasized that she supports the church's teachings, but observed that to a person dying from AIDS, condemnation of their particular lifestyle sends a judgmental message.

Kathleen Quinlan, Isaiah House director, agreed with Sister Golden. "I would wish that the condemnation of homosexuality would cease," she said.

Part of the church's dilemma in dealing with AIDS is that it must pronounce standards for society as a whole, noted Sister Kay Heverin, SSJ, pastoral assistant at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Sister Heverin has spoken at numerous diocesan-

sponsored AIDS educational workshops over the last few years.

"I feel that people don't always understand that the church must take a normative stance," she said. Nonetheless, Sister Heverin criticized the church as a whole for not continually assuring people with AIDS that they are loved. "We as a church have got to get the message out that we are loving and compassionate," she said.

Until recently, Sister Heverin pointed out, most Catholics have perceived AIDS as a mysterious disease confined to homosexuals and drug users — two populations that have been on the outskirts of societal acceptance.

But AIDS is steadily moving into the heterosexual community, she said, and with that movement will come a belated recognition by the average Catholic of his or her responsibility towards people with AIDS.

"Whether we know it or not, there are people in the parishes dealing with the disease in their family and friends," she said.

One church figure drew universal praise for his efforts to open the church to AIDS victims — Bishop Matthew H. Clark. In particular, several Catholics praised him for his 1988 pastoral statement, "The Lord Himself Taught Me To Have Compassion."

Bishop Clark's statement likened society's treatment of people with AIDS to previous generations' attitude toward lepers. "The society of the early 12th century considered lepers cursed by God and expelled them from the community," the statement noted, adding that St. Francis of Assisi questioned this stance and eventually embraced, both figuratively and literally, the leper community.

"What made these people so different?" St. Francis asked. "Were they not sons and daughters of the Most High and Glorious Creator? Did not our Brother Jesus heal lepers?"

The bishop's statement also refuted the contention that AIDS is a punishment sent by God, and the document emphasized that the church must work to include those with AIDS in its sacramental and social life. "I invite our local Church to use this occasion ... to care for those weakest among us," Bishop Clark wrote in his conclusion.

But do gays and people with AIDS in the diocese believe the local church has responded to Bishop Clark's invitation?

Yes, Paul said, in some cases, the Rochester diocese has been exemplary in its behavior. "In the diocese, there are a lot of individual people who are very compassionate and caring," he said, noting that many Catholics have volunteered with local organizations working with AIDS patients.

At an official level, the divisions of social ministry and education have sponsored workshops on AIDS to educate parish staff members, catechists, and school teachers about the disease. Since last spring, nearly all parishes have received an AIDS resource packet, which was prepared by Sister Heverin, Sister Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, education consultant for social ministry, and Anne Wegman, an associate director of the department of youth ministry.

The packet outlines ways in which parishes can educate their congregations about the disease, and encourage parishioners to participate in community educational efforts to fight the disease's spread and to comfort those afflicted with AIDS.

Sister Nothwehr noted that 39 other dioceses and parishes throughout the United States have asked for copies of the packet to use as the basis for their own AIDS educational efforts.

Other diocesan AIDS-related efforts have met with mixed results. Last spring,

the Catholic Family Center's Department of Disabled Services shelved a program designed to match people with AIDS to volunteers who would visit them.

Lucy Dechaine, manager of CFC's disabled services, explained the program's cancellation by pointing out that people with AIDS often don't want strangers visiting them. Hence, she said, her office received few referrals from local hospitals wanting to use the service, and attributed the demise of the program to lack of interest.

Ken Maher, manager of CFC's Department of Justice and Peace, said his office has been active in promoting multi-denominational healing services on AIDS through the Greater Rochester AIDS Interfaith Network, an ecumenical group. Maher also noted that his department has worked with the diocesan Department of

Continued on page 15