Brothers’ Keeper

The Kansas City Star confirmed what gay Catholics have known for years -- yes, Virginia, priests are living with AIDS. Dignity alum Andy Humm reports from the sanctuary.

June 1, 2000 By Andy Humm

The call comes in the middle of the night. The caller tells me he’s a man in his late forties who has had HIV for seven years. He’s come out to his family about his status, and to a few people he works with, but he says that he wishes to remain completely anonymous. He feels “terribly isolated,” sure that he would be asked to leave his job of 22 years if he went public about his status. This is the voice of a priest with AIDS.

I had put the word out to scores of people in AIDS work and church circles -- many of them friends from my own involvement in Dignity, the gay Catholic movement, 20 years ago -- that *POZ* was doing a story on priests with AIDS in the wake of an explosive three-part series in *The Kansas City Star*. We all knew many priests who had died of AIDS, but those living with it today -- with one prominent exception in Miami -- refused to come out about it. Through intermediaries, several priests with AIDS declined interviews, even when promised anonymity.

My midnight caller, who reached me through a Dignity contact, is closeted, even though he’s been a leading AIDS educator in his rural region for 15 years -- work that he began long before he seroconverted through what he would only say was “high-risk behavior.” He says he often feels tired and wishes he could tell his parishioners that it’s because of his meds, but he fears career-ending rejection. “Forgiveness is what we preach,” he says, “but we are so quick to judge people who make ’wrong choices.’” He’s not only sick from HIV, he says, “I’m sick of being thought of as divine.”

When *The Star* reported this winter that hundreds of Roman Catholic priests in the United States have died of AIDS and hundreds more have HIV, it immediately became one of the biggest AIDS stories of the year. Media outlets across the nation led with statistics from the series -- based on death certificates and a survey of 801 of the nation’s 46,000 priests -- that 20 percent of American priests are gay or bisexual, and that priests have four to eight times the national rate of HIV infection.

“Priests-with-AIDS Story Strained Belief,” charged the *Toronto Star*. “Disturbing and Misleading,” huffed the Hartford *Courant*. “Media Sex Fixation Slants Reporting,” complained the South Bend *Tribune*. My old friend Bill McNichols, an out gay Jesuit priest and artist from a well-known political family, bravely commented to *The Kansas City Star* on this complex problem and his grief for his

brother priests. Back in his hometown of Denver, they played the *Star* story as “Son of Former Governor Loses 100 Friends to AIDS.” The revelations were shocking to many, but to gay Catholics, who know that most priests are sexually active and a significant percentage are gay, it was confirmation of the obvious.

What I saw as a sensitive account of an underreported story, the church hierarchy called Catholic-bashing. Santa Fe’s Archbishop Michael Sheehan condemned the series as a “hatchet job.” The Cardinal of Philadelphia tried to get *The Star* to reveal how many of his priests responded to the survey. The right-wing Catholic League trumpeted an analysis by the conservative Statistical Assessment Service faulting the methodology of the survey -- then chided the press for not playing up such survey findings as the 65 percent of priests who say the church is “caring and compassionate” in its treatment of priests with AIDS (only 4 percent were critical). “Why not report that celibacy saves lives?” asked the League’s Patrick Scully.

To many gay clerics, the series cast a cleansing light on church hypocrisy. “The church should think with its heart rather than put a spin on it,” says Rev. Bob Goss, who left the Catholic priesthood for service to the mostly gay Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). He lost both his partner and his brother to AIDS. “The story is about men who desire and want love and for whom celibacy doesn’t work,” he says.

Judy L. Thomas, *The Star*’s reporter, told *POZ* that she began gathering information for her in-depth report in 1993 when a friend’s priest died of AIDS in Wichita and she learned that two more of the local diocese’s 130 priests had as well. “If there were so many priests dying in a church that requires a vow of celibacy, then that was worth looking into,” she says. Her years of spadework and patience won her the trust of several gay priests, priests with AIDS, and their families and colleagues, as well as some church leaders who were looking for solutions -- like improving sex education in the seminary -- rather than putting up walls.

Thomas says she’s been under siege since the series ran in late January. Within a month, 1,000 people had called or e-mailed her. “They hated it or loved it,” she says. “Quite a few were priests who said, ’Thank you.’” Many lay Catholics, she adds, “were disturbed by it, but glad to see it brought out.”

One of those most pleased with the series was Rev. Dennis Rausch, 48, the most out priest with AIDS in the country, who was profiled in the story. He spoke openly with Thomas because he was concerned that AIDS “needed to be brought back to the foreground.” He heads the Archdiocese of Miami’s HIV/AIDS Ministry, a model for other dioceses that includes counseling, friendly visiting and advocacy. He points out that “the Catholic Church is in every country in the world and AIDS is in every country,” and believes that the church can therefore be a powerful advocate for making AIDS drugs affordable in the Third World.

Rausch has been out about his status for three years and to two successive Archbishops, both of whom, he says, have been supportive. He is now so open that he recently announced his improved blood count from the pulpit -- and received applause and hugs from congregants. Rausch’s

openness is rare, perhaps enabled by his support of Catholic doctrine. He never says anything in his education work or ministry that "goes beyond church teaching." When kids ask how he got HIV, he says he doesn't answer because it is "irrelevant"; he won't discuss with me the church's condemnation of homosexuality and condoms, though he says the subjects are not off-limits in his education program.

Finding other priests with AIDS to talk to *POZ* was harder. A therapist who had treated many and cooperated with the *Star* story clammed up when I called him after the controversial series ran. After weeks of outreach through the Internet, personal contacts and church officials, a lay friend agreed to speak with two priests with HIV, but both were too afraid. One priest who did AIDS ministry in the Archdiocese of Newark for 10 years, Rev. Dennis Cocozza, says he was told by chancery officials there in 1994 that 15 out of their 1,500 priests were living with AIDS. They were connected in a support group so discreet that even he did not know their names. "To my knowledge," he says, "no one [in Newark] is out to their congregation."

But the deaths of priests with AIDS tell stories, too. When I was at the Hetrick-Martin Institute for gay youth in the early 1990s, Rev. Charles Scheidt worked for me as an educator. Despite being out as gay and surrounded by openly positive coworkers, he kept his HIV status mostly secret until, on his deathbed, he made a public display of converting to the Episcopal Church in protest of the abandonment he felt from Catholicism.

A more prominent case was Bishop Emerson Moore of the Archdiocese of New York, a favorite of Pope John Paul II who died of AIDS in a Midwest hospice in 1995. According to *The Star*, the death certificate of this crusader against racism and for women's ordination, who supported abstinence-only sex education in the city's public schools, listed him as a "laborer" who died of "unknown natural causes." When *The New York Times* broke the real story of the death of this closeted gay and drug-addicted church leader shortly after he died, someone who had been in drug treatment with Moore said, "He was a beautiful, tortured man who didn't seem to have any real idea how great he was. I often thought that he was the loneliest man I had ever met."

In the 1980s, many priests with AIDS disclosed to their congregations and were sympathetically received because "it was at the end of their lives," says physician and Jesuit priest Rev. John Fuller, cofounder of the National Catholic AIDS Network. Today, with better treatments, he says, it has become harder, not easier, to come out.

Some priests would like to be open about their status, but choose not to, afraid to antagonize their superiors and risk losing their insurance. Rev. Jim Mitulski, the openly HIV positive pastor of MCC/San Francisco, says his late Catholic friend Rev. Bob Arpin was threatened with this form of retribution by the Archdiocese of San Francisco for speaking out against church teachings on AIDS prevention and homosexuality. Everyone I spoke with for this story agreed that priests with AIDS are well taken care of; the trade-off is they must keep their condition a secret.

Many seminaries now screen candidates for HIV, according to the *Star* story. But Fuller said that his group encourages dioceses to update their seminary testing policies in light of the new

therapies available. While most seminaries test, and then remove HIV positive candidates, Oakland's and New York City's do not. "We no more have a policy on priests with AIDS than priests with other illnesses," says Joe Zwilling, spokesperson for the Archdiocese of New York.

With the Catholic Church one of the largest providers of AIDS services in the world, activists have long protested church policies against gay rights, condoms and safe sex. Pope John Paul II may have apologized for the church's sins in March, but these teachings were not on the list. That same month, the Vatican attacked the promotion of condom use in AIDS-devastated Africa.

While the Vatican won't budge on doctrine, Fuller says that the large number of priests with AIDS has compelled seminaries to acknowledge that there are gay clergy and to help candidates "become more knowledgeable and open about sexuality." This is especially critical since, as *The Star* documented, almost all priestly infections are due to male-to-male sexual transmission. Dignity/USA's president, Mary Louise Cervone, says the *Star* series will "have little effect on church leadership," but hopes that "average Catholics will demand change."

Gay priest, author and therapist John McNeill was expelled from the Jesuits for breaking a taboo against affirming gay love. He estimates that within the higher religious orders, 30 percent to 40 percent of priests are gay -- more than the *Star* survey found -- and argues that if the church is ever going to fully tap the strength of its priests, "it must acknowledge that there are moral and holy gay relationships."

After *The Star*'s series, MCC's Mitulski, a former Catholic, issued a press release calling on priests who are gay or HIV positive to come out. "You can't be a good pastor and conceal that you have HIV," he says. "I speak from experience. You can't attend to your health appropriately, and you are setting a bad example. You're communicating a message that there is something shameful about having AIDS." His choice to be open about having AIDS, he says, relieves his isolation and makes it easier for parishioners with HIV to talk to him. "To my Catholic colleagues I say, 'You can still do ministry as a social worker, teacher or in the liberal churches. Don't waste your precious life mired in secrecy, shame and guilt.'"

Selected Resources Organizations:
National Catholic AIDS Network, 707.874.3031 or http://www.ncan.org/

HIV/AIDS Ministry, Archdiocese of Miami, 954.565.7595; Dignity/USA, 800.877.8797 or http://www.dignityusa.org/;

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, 310.360.8640 or http://www.ufmcc.com/.

Readings:

The Kansas City Star, *"AIDS in the Priesthood," http://www.kcstar.com/;*
An Epistle of Comfort, *on spirituality for PWAs, by Rev. Bill Dobbles, a Jesuit priest who died of AIDS*

in 1992 (Sheed & Ward).

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