Christian Soldiers

Mario Gonzalez does good works with Catholic group

May 12, 1995 By Juan Carlos Perez

They are unlikely allies in a war that demands uncommon heroes: Evangelicals and PWAs, working together against ignorance, homophobia and AIDS. When I first heard of the ministry of The Least of These two years ago, I somewhat doubted their mission. I thought, “Dios mio, what has the Religious Right done this time? Infiltrated the AIDS wards? The ranks of those abandoned by relatives and friends?”

Luckily, I was mistaken.

Based in Yonkers, New York, The Least of These—the name is taken from St. Matthew’s Gospel—is a nonprofit organization with chapters in New York and New Jersey that operates on a strictly voluntary basis. Expanding rapidly in spite of short of a shortage of funds, its members hope to reach other AIDS –ravage areas in the country, such as Miami and Puerto Rico. Their approach is fairly simple: Part compassion, part food and resources and lots of love. And absolutely, positively no proselytizing.

These tenets are not only preached. But practiced every Monday evening at places like the Discreet Wards of Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center in Manhattan. Up to a dozen members of any given chapter of the group visit the 126 beds that hold people with AIDS, becoming buddies with them. Because the visitors, like their buddies, are mostly people of color, they approach their friends with an invaluable ethnic sensitivity, a sensitivity that appeals not only to the soul but to the stomach as well.

It’s not uncommon to smell aromas of soul and Latin foods wafting through the corridors of the wards. A menu of arroz con pollo, Puerto Rican pastels, Cuban black beans, collard greens and flan, all cooked by the volunteers, can certainly open up anyone’s appetite. “We pretty much stumbled upon that idea,” remembers Leigh Piatt-Gonzalez, minister and wife of Reverend Mario Gonzalez, the driving force behind the group. “You know how Latinos gather around the table to eat. Food is something that brings us together.” Piatt-Gonzalez points out that the members are not only good at cooking but at offering solace and advice if needed. They have been trained in the field of caretaking and are approved by all the places they visit, whether a hospital such as Goldwater Memorial or a prison like Rikers Island.

Sister Joan Gannon, in charge of pastoral services at Terence Cardinal Cooke, admits to having been leery at first of the group's motives. "When they came to me with the idea of visiting the wards, I was a little bit skeptical," says the Catholic nun. "I didn't wan them to come here and preach fire and brimstone. But they assured me they only wanted to bring joy to the people, some food and to make them feel wanted. It's amazing what they have done."

Patients started gaining weight, beams a proud Reverend Gonzalez, and they soon found strength in a group of strangers that proved to them not all was lost. "They were just what we needed," said PWA Cesar Gomez, whose highlight of the week is sharing with the group. "A lot of people count on them, and they don't leave till they have seen everyone. That makes me feel good. It makes me feel wanted."

Reverend Mickey Fuentes, who originated the concept of visiting the ward when a close friend contracted HIV more than a decade ago—then the group was only four people, and hardly organized—explains further: "We don't go in with crosses, treatises or Bibles," says the minister of Harlem's Spanish Christina Church and leader of that area's The Least of These chapter. "Anybody can walk in with a bible, but how many out there are willing to go in and change a soiled sheet?"

If Gonzalez and Fuentes, their spouses and other church members got involved in the fight against AIDS, it wasn't just because God told them to do so. Then why, I asked, why care for junkies and queers, whores and others viewed by many as castoffs?

"Because we all knew someone, whether a relative or a friend, who had succumbed to the AIDS virus," says Fuentes's wife, Tania. Pastor Gonzalez is blunt: "What we are all talking about is a disease that's killing Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, Dominicans, Mexicans—all people for whom the subject [of AIDS] remains taboo," he says. "But AIDS is a reality in our Latino culture, and we must deal with it."

Tania, a legal secretary, says that believers of all religious denominations should join the fight. "Some of our brothers don't understand what we are doing," she says. "But this has nothing to do with being gay or a drug addict. This has to do with being left out." Something that, everybody here agrees, conservative Christian churches have largely failed to address. "I will be the first one to admit that, as Evangelicals, as Protestants, we have lacked sensitivity," says pastor Gonzalez. "And we may be the exception in what we do. But we are trying to be true Christians. And that means fighting this epidemic. That means having compassion."

Something that The Least of These never seems to lack.

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