I Say a Little Prayer

Can Joe Westmoreland meet his deeply devout Mom halfway?

September 1, 2005 By Joe Westmoreland

Twelve years. I hadn't been home in 12 years. By "home," I mean a God-fearing, middle-American suburb of Kansas City, Missouri, where I grew up. I'd last dropped by in 1993 for Dad's funeral. I swore I'd never return. If my mother wanted to see me, she could come to New York. (Not that I encouraged her.) You see, back in '93, I'd known I was positive. But I didn't dare tell my born-again family, who already reproached my homosexuality. There we stood, mourning my father, when someone told me, "We love you, but not the demon that lives inside you." They overlooked the true demon inside me—the virus that nearly caused my own funeral. We forged an icy truce, and I developed a highly personal spirituality—which sustained me amid their "family values." Yet, this spring, I watched my legs walk me through the Kansas City airport, into my mother's embrace.

Why had I come? For one thing, she's 75—and said she wanted me to see her in her house one last time. Before, that is, she resorted to assisted living. I believed her but arrived prepared for the worst. Since my last visit, I'd grown deathly ill from full-blown AIDS. I'd had to tell Mom I was positive and resented my "confessional" tone. To Mom, HIV was an accoutrement of a heathen lifestyle, something shameful and heretic. Of course, she loves me in her own way. But her "own way" meant calling the hospital several times a day, asking me to pray with her. I stopped answering the phone—which made the nurses think I was dead. Moreover, when HAART kicked my viral load to "undetectable" and I told Mom what a miracle that was, she translated that to "It's a miracle—I've been cured of AIDS!" She credited all the people praying for me. And then she refocused her "concern" to my sexuality. It seemed to me that many in my family had an easier time accepting me as a gaunt, sickly gay man than as a healthy gay survivor.
It was the healthy survivor she hugged at the airport.

We drove to my brother's house, where, before eating, I was asked to hold their hands in prayer. And then my mother, quite suddenly, said, "There are two things I want to do while you're here. First, I want to take you to that support group I mentioned—for parents of people with HIV." I was stunned. But she continued: "Everyone in the group reads your articles. You can meet our leader, Sister Kevin." At this, my shock turned to fear—she had not only joined a support group, she was hanging with trannies.

But when I arrived at Kansas City's Good Samaritan Project, I saw that Sister Kevin, a Roman Catholic nun, was 100% woman, committed to helping conflicted parents broker better

relationships with their HIVer children. The three of us bonded, God help me, over Bush's AIDS cutbacks. Was my red-state mother a Bush basher now? Hearing other moms talk about what they're going through has obviously helped her see I'm in better shape than she imagined. And that got me thinking: Maybe *she's* in better shape than I'd imagined. Why must the "other side"—i.e., not me—always be the one that needs the support group? What could I learn about her perspective that would help me reach out—and reach in? This much is clear: We've made a good start. Now, I won't pretend we've rewritten decades of history. I haven't mentioned the other thing Mom wanted us to do in Kansas City.

"Joe," she asked, "have you seen *The Passion of the Christ*?"
