Good Habits

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has been blessing us for three decades.

July 1, 2009 By Trent Straube

In 1979, three free-spirited men wearing nun habits hit the streets of San Francisco to challenge conformity and homophobia. Today, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has grown into an order of about 600 sisters, some whom are living with HIV, in nearly 20 orders worldwide.

“We’re not drag queens, we’re not all men, and we’re not all gay,” clarifies Sister Edith Myflesh of the San Francisco order. “We consider ourselves nuns, and part of our job is taking care of people who traditional religion passes on.”

When the epidemic first hit, the sisters made AIDS a major focus. They’re responsible for one of the first AIDS candlelight vigils and safe-sex pamphlets, titled Play Fair! Back in 1982, nobody wanted to hear about condoms, recalls founder Sister Hysterectoria. “Instead of men saying [to play safe] it was nuns, and that made it more palpable.”

Although theatrics and partying remain part of their mantra, the sisters still make AIDS activism a priority—they deliver food and sweets such as strawberries and chocolate to AIDS hospices, march in demonstrations, teach safer-sex seminars and raise funds for numerous AIDS services—last year, the San Fran order raised more than $200,000.

And in countries with socialized medicine, according to Sister Innocenta of Paris, the order’s focus turns from money to education and ministry—which often entails simply listening to a lonely patron at a bar.

Because they’re on the fringe, notes Sister Unity Divine of Los Angeles, they’re able to service constituents overlooked by mainstream agencies. The freak factor underscores a message: “If we’re here looking as we look,” she says, “there’s room for you to be who you are with no shame or fear.” Amen to that!

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