

I ran into another priest a couple days ago. "Hi," I said. "How are you?" "HIV negative," he answered. "How are you?"

The same, but to read *The Kansas City Star* this week, you'd have to wonder. Our local newspaper claims that the incidence of AIDS among priests is high. They've drawn several conclusions from a national survey. That some priests are gay. That some priests do not practice celibacy. That seminaries do not prepare priests for sexual struggles. That the church should rethink the celibate priesthood and gay sexual relationships.

Harsh criticism has arisen from the Catholic community. The *Star* says AIDS is four times higher among priests than in the general population. But AIDS occurs among males 6 times more than among females. One story centers on one seminary in the mid-1960s, a school which is now closed. The paper uses a story nearly forty years old to criticize seminary education today. The *Star* charges that the Catholic Church has no policy on AIDS. A phone call to the newspaper revealed that neither do they. Nor does either have a policy on diabetes.

The material attempts to mark the beginning of the end of the Catholic Church. "AIDS in the priesthood," the paper says, "strikes straight at the heart of church doctrine." Well, no it doesn't. Church doctrine has to do with the creed we recite every Sunday. Not with the health of priests. The media frequently confuse central doctrines with newsy practices. Jesus stands at the center of our doctrine, not celibacy. By positioning this material on the front page, the *Star* is receiving criticism that it has sensationalized the data. Recent changes to the front page only support the suspicion. We used to see headlines on top of page one. Now we see photos of celebrities.

If the *Star* is right that one half of one percent of priests are HIV positive, that is alarming. Priests preach chastity. If you're married, you have sex with your spouse. If you're not married, you wait. If you promise celibacy, you practice it. Anytime we priests stray from our promises it hurts our credibility, just as marital infidelity, premarital sex, and divorce hurt the credibility of married people.

But it will be difficult for the editors to deflect the charge of an anti-Catholic bias. Priests stand for many values that a newspaper will oppose, including the dignity of human life, economic justice, sexual fidelity, and fiscal restraint.

The paper wants to force changes in the church. I'd like to see changes in the paper. Many people with AIDS, including some priests, have died not wanting others to know. They want to be remembered for who they were while they lived, not for the disease they had when they died. The *Star* has made it all the more difficult for people with this illness to reach out for compassion. Who wants to talk about your disease if you're going to end up on the national news?

Several weeks ago I talked about vocations. I said I find priesthood immensely rewarding work. I still stand by that statement. As St. Paul says today, I preach this gospel which has been entrusted to me. If anyone here is considering priesthood as your vocation, or if you are encouraging someone else toward religious life, you should know that preaching the gospel brings satisfaction. But there's something else I should tell you. If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. Priesthood is not for wimps.