

Veronica Torrejon

J-468

Laura Castaneda

Dec. 12, 2001

AIDS and Gay Catholic Priests: Implications of the Kansas City Star Report

On Jan 30, 2001, the Kansas City Star launched the first of a three-day series of articles written by Staff Writer Judy Thomas about Catholic Priests dying of AIDS. The front-page series, which sparked national media attention, dealt with many issues surrounding the AIDS-related deaths of Catholic priests, including the implication that many of the infected priests acquired the disease through homosexual relations.

The series, which contained 11 articles, centered around a study conducted by the Kansas City Star, which examined data that collected through a nationwide confidential survey of 3,000 priests, 801 of which responded to the survey. One of the more shocking findings that were published by the Kansas City Star was that Catholic priests are dying at a rate 4 times that of the general U.S. public. The report also found that hundreds have died of AIDS and hundreds more are living with the virus that causes AIDS. The findings of the report were published in almost all of the large mainstream newspapers, magazines and Catholic publications.

The series itself was thorough and well researched, with historical background on the issues of AIDS, homosexuality, and celibacy in the Catholic Church. The story was well balanced, and included interviews with specialists, epidemiologists, and Catholic bishops, priests dying of AIDS, their families, and friends. However, aside from the

serious nature of the story, there were several disturbing elements to the report and subsequent coverage, such as the implied causal relationship between AIDS, homosexuality and broken celibacy vows, and use of the outdated, clinical label “homosexual” by many of the newspapers.

The official Catholic doctrine dictates that, while a “homosexual” person should be “accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity,” homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” (Martin). In other words, as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, it is fine for a person to be gay, so long as he/she does not engage in homosexual “acts.” Thus, theoretically, gay Catholic priests would pose no significant challenge to Catholic doctrine, as their vow of celibacy would prevent them from engaging in any type of homosexual act. However, the fact that Catholic priests are dying of AIDS, would suggest that, in some cases, both gay and straight Catholic priests are breaking their vows of celibacy. In the case of gay Catholic priests, this would pose an additional moral dilemma since these priests would not only be breaking their vows of celibacy, but also forsaking Catholic rules against “homosexual acts.”

This moral dilemma, as well as other historical background on the Church and AIDS and homosexuality, was presented objectively by Thomas in one of the many articles in the series, and was titled “Homosexuality, AIDS and celibacy: the church’s view.” Thomas included information on the history of celibacy in the Catholic Church. She wrote, “Celibacy has not always been the rule for priests in the Catholic Church. Some popes allowed priests to marry until the 11th century, when Pope Gregory VII banned them from doing so, in part to keep priests' families from inheriting church property.” The article also presented additional moral dilemmas facing the church in the

wake of the AIDS epidemic such as the use of condoms as a preventive measure against the spread of AIDS, which poses additional problems, since the church does not condone sex that is not intended for procreation. In the article, Thomas cited a 1989 statement issued by U.S. Bishops, which had a somewhat negative tone. It stated, "the use of prophylactics to prevent the spread of HIV is technically unreliable. Moreover, advocating this approach means, in effect, promoting behavior which is morally unacceptable." Yet Thomas also balanced the negative comment with one of the more positive statements by the Bishops, which was the idea that, "we [Catholics] must reject the idea that this illness is a direct punishment by God." In this manner, Thomas creates a balanced story by not including purely negative comments by the Catholic Church.

Thomas also did a good job of including many perspectives on the issue. She included comments from Bishops, Catholic priests who were HIV positive and their family and friends. She also avoided stereotyping priests with AIDS by including the perspective of straight priests who were HIV positive, and gay priests who were not HIV positive. She also interviewed former Catholic priests and religious leaders from other religious denominations. Furthermore, she included the perspective of people outside of the Catholic church such as doctors, epidemiologists, and statisticians.

Although for the most part, Thomas did a good job of not including derogatory or negative comments in her articles, occasionally prejudicial quotes were included. In her article titled, "Catholic Priests are Dying of AIDS, Often in Silence," Thomas included a statement by Catholic priest Jim Nickel who said, "There are priests who are gay, there are priests with AIDS, there are priests who are different that are doing wonderful ministry." Although this comment appears positive on it's surface, saying gay priests are

different promotes the notion that gays especially gay priests are some sort of “other,” who are separate from “normal” people, when in fact gays are just like everyone else; they just happen to be attracted to others of the same sex.

But in spite of the positive aspects of the series, Thomas’s coverage of prejudicial themes such as the implied causal relationship between AIDS and homosexuality had a very negative impact on the story in general. The lead of one article, titled “Issue prompting church to deal with homosexuality among priests,” illustrates the prejudicial connection established between AIDS and gays throughout the series. The article begins, “The AIDS related deaths of hundreds of its priests force the Roman Catholic Church to acknowledge a reality that it has tried to avoid for centuries. A significant number of its clergy are gay.” This statement is a fallacy because the logic behind it is based on the false assumption that there is a connection between AIDS and being gay. But the reality is that not all gay men have AIDS and not all AIDS victims are gay. And while it is true that in the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, AIDS was considered a gay disease, we now know that AIDS can be and is transmitted through heterosexual sex as well as intravenous drug use and blood transfusions. The stereotypical and false correlation between AIDS and gays is dangerous because it perpetuates the public’s fear of gays, who they assume are connected to the terrible and incurable disease: AIDS.

Yet interestingly, the media has not made the same assumptions about AIDS and homosexuality when it comes to other minority groups. According to a Nov. 30, 2001, report from the Centers for Disease Control, HIV and AIDS in the United States disproportionately affect racial/ethnic minority populations, particularly blacks and Hispanics. Yet, after this report was released, I found no articles in any of the major news

publications that connected the high AIDS rate in minority groups to a rise in homosexuality within those groups. This would tend to suggest that a preconceived correlation between gays and Catholic priests also contributed to the prejudicial connection between AIDS and gay Catholic priests.

Throughout the series, Thomas only qualified her correlation between AIDS and gay Catholic priests once. Buried in the middle of the article titled, “Catholic Priests are dying of AIDS often in silence,” was a short discourse on the ethics of the assumption that priests contracted the disease by sleeping with other men. Thomas wrote, “Some would caution that it would be wrong to assume that all priests with HIV became infected by engaging in homosexual activity.” She went on to explain that HIV can be transmitted through heterosexual or homosexual contact. She then briefly mentioned what is one of the more compelling arguments that since many priests served as missionaries in underdeveloped countries, they could have contacted the disease in that way. This single fact could account for a slight rise in the rate of AIDS among priests, yet Thomas never followed up this statement with any analysis. She also included a one-sentence paraphrase by a priest and physician who said, “Because the virus has a long incubation period, a priest may have become infected before taking his vows” She then left it to the reader to figure out the implication of that statement which would essential refute her claim that since Catholic priests were dying of AIDS they must be breaking their vows of celibacy. In the end Thomas, attempted to justify her correlation between AIDS and gay priests by stating, “Experts say the incidence of AIDS among priests stems primarily from sexual contact.” Yet she never explained nor backed up this comment with a name of a researcher who would have said this. Nor did she explain why a researcher would

have come to this conclusion. She simply left all of these questions unanswered, and resumed her coverage under the false assumption that AIDS would necessarily link Catholic priests to homosexuality.

Sadly, all of the coverage that I could find in the mainstream media unquestioningly adopted the correlation between AIDS and gays that was established by the Kansas City Star. I found at least 58 articles printed in 23 major newspapers that either reported on the Kansas City Star report or most commonly, reprinted one or more or a combination of the articles. The most prejudicial coverage of the Kansas City Star report was published by the Hartford Courant, which only published the Kansas City Star article titled “AIDS cases raise gay issue for Catholic Church,” that established a correlation between AIDS and homosexuality. This article, which began with the aforementioned lead linking AIDS to gay priests, framed the story of AIDS in the priesthood around the issue of gay priests. The article read, “Priests and experts offer several explanations for the presence of gays among Catholic clergy: Some say the church gives gays a protective cover” (AIDS cases raise gay issue..) The article hardly mentioned the more important issue, which was that priests were dying of AIDS. The Chicago Sun-Times presented the least offensive coverage of the Kansas City Star report. The Sun-Times framed it’s article around the Kansas City Star finding that priests were dying of AIDS and did not focus on the gay issue. The quotes that the Sun-Times did included about AIDS and gay Catholic priests, were balanced. For instance, the Sun-Times chose to include quotes by Bishop Thomas Gumbleton who said, “Gay priests and heterosexual priests didn’t know how to handle their sexuality.” He also said, “How to be celibate and to be gay at the same time, and how to be celibate and heterosexual at the

same time, that's what we were never really taught how to do" (AIDS killing U.S. priests, report says). These quotes refer to issues surrounding the priesthood, celibacy, and AIDS as a heterosexual and gay problem. These balanced quotes were the only two references to gays in the article which more appropriately focused on AIDS and the death toll among Catholic priests.

Months later, when the mainstream press did begin to criticize the series, it wasn't because of the stereotypical correlation between AIDS and gays, but rather the methods that Star used to collect their data. The Toronto Star, and Denver Rocky Mountain News, as well as several other publications disagreed with the Star's small sample size and the interpretation of the data that it obtained. Yet interestingly, both the Rocky Mountain News and the Toronto Star included coverage of the Kansas City Star Report when it was initially released. The anonymous nature of the survey, was also criticized by many publications who felt that this aspect left room to doubt the credibility of the sources who responded. The Denver Rocky Mountain News, even acknowledged the initial unquestioning publication of the report without examination of the facts. Reporters David Murray and Robert Lichter said, "Despite the heavy and uncritical news coverage, questions about the survey suggest caution in inferring a hidden AIDS epidemic among priests" (Murray). And although, the Denver Rocky Mountain News did not criticize the correlation established by the Star between AIDS and gays, it did question the accuracy of the Stars claim that 15 percent of Catholic priests are gay. Murray and Lichter reported, "The potential skewing of the sample in regard to sexual orientation means the finding of 15 percent homosexuality has no application beyond the group who

responded.” Thus the correlation between AIDS and gay Catholic priests is not even supported by the Star’s own data.

As a result of the criticism about the series, the Kansas City Star included a follow up series of 4 articles on Nov 4, 2000. The Follow-up series presented new and more accurate data that that the Star had compiled including documentation of more than 300 AIDS-related priest deaths nationwide through death certificates and interviews with family members and religious colleagues. The follow-up series also focused less on the gay issue, only briefly mentioning it in the first article. Thomas wrote, “The Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of America magazine, a national Jesuit publication, said one of biggest problems was the silence surrounding the issue of gay priests.” This comment, along with only a few additional paragraphs, was the only mention of gay priests in the series. And although the article focused more on AIDS deaths than gay issues, the correlation between AIDS and gay priests was not resolved and continued to exist within the coverage.

Yet interestingly, the gay press almost completely ignored the Kansas City Star Report. I was only able to find a 155-word article about the Kansas City Star report that was published in the Advocate. The article published by the Advocate, wasn’t as long as the articles in the mainstream press, which may or may not account for the fact that it didn’t focus on the relationship between AIDS and gay priests. The Advocate began the article by stating its assumption that there are many gay men in the priesthood. It then went on to blame the closeted existence of these priests on the fact that they were becoming infected with the virus that causes AIDS. The article began, “That some Catholic priests are closeted gay men is hardly a surprise. But the toll that the closet has

taken on priests is shocking” (The priesthood’s hidden pain). I was disturbed that the Advocate also, on some level, implies a relationship between AIDS and homosexuality with this comment, yet not as implicitly as the Kansas City Star.

On the other hand, the Catholic press looked at the Kansas City Star Report pretty thoroughly and but with the same poor objectivity as the mainstream press. Catholic publications such as America and The National Catholic Reporter also failed in the same manner as the mainstream press to question the false correlation between AIDS and gay Catholic priests. However, America magazine brought up the fact that this issue of gay Catholic priests and AIDS is not a new topic. Jon Fuller, a physician and founding president of the National Catholic AIDS Network, wrote the article titled “Priests With AIDS - What are the lessons for the church?” Fuller is also an assistant director of the Adult AIDS Program at Boston Medical Center. In the article Fuller questioned why the Kansas City Star report was received so much attention since the topic was not new especially in the Catholic Press. He wrote, “ Is it that people are surprised priests have developed AIDS, or that some are homosexual? The data are certainly not new. The fact that priests have been stricken with H.I.V.-AIDS has been noted in local and national newspapers and magazines, in The National Catholic Reporter and Origins, in books written by priests living with AIDS and in AIDS quilts made for the Names Project” (Fuller). He went on to attribute the media attention to the fact that the Star marketed their study as unique and the fact that they emphasized the rate of AIDS among Catholic priests as being 4 times greater. In this manner, the Catholic press was more thorough in examining the issue, than the mainstream press.

Overall, almost without exception, the publications that covered the Kansas City Star report on AIDS and Catholic priests failed to objectively represent the gay community. The gay community and specifically gay Catholic priests, were represented as group that is synonymous with the AIDS epidemic. The Kansas City Star series could have been framed as two separate issues, one involving AIDS and Catholic priests and the other involving Catholic priests and homosexuality. However the combination of both issues established a prejudicial correlation between AIDS and gays. This was unfortunate considering the fact that Thomas was careful not to fall into the common traps of biased reporting on gays and lesbians such as lack of perspective from the gay community or the use of the overly clinical term homosexual instead of gay when referring to a gay man or woman. In addition, Thomas appeared to argue against the prejudicial and exclusionary Catholic doctrine against gays and lesbians. Yet ultimately her established tie between AIDS and gays was enough to cast a negative light on the story in general.

Works Cited

- Fuller, Jon. "Priests With AIDS - What are the lessons for the church?" America. 18 March 2000.
- Murray, David and Robert Lichter. "Survey on Priests, AIDS Fatally Flawed." Denver Rocky Mountain News. 13 February 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. 2001. Keyword: AIDS and Kansas City Star.

“Priests-with-AIDS Story Strained Belief.” Editorial. Toronto Star. 12 February 2000.

Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. 2001. Keyword: AIDS and Kansas City Star.

“The Priesthood’s hidden pain.” Advocate. 14 March 2000.

Thomas, Judy. “Catholic Priests are dying of AIDS, often in silence” Kansas City Star.

30 January 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. “Priests Speak out in National Survey.” Kansas City Star. 30 January

2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. “AIDS, Gay Related Issues Trouble Many Denominations” Kansas City

Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. “Homosexuality, AIDS and celibacy: the church’s view” Kansas City

Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. “Florida priest finds acceptance after devastating news” Kansas City Star.

30 January 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. “Mark Zieman: Editor and Vice President: Priests stories carry crucial

message” Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexis Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. "Seminary taught spirituality, liturgy, and Latin – sexuality was taboo"

Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexus Academic Universe. 6 Dec.

Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. "Journal reveals pain, acceptance" Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000.

Lexis Nexus Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. "Issue prompting church to deal with homosexuality among priests"

Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexus Academic Universe. 6 Dec.

Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. "Those who council priests with AIDS say the church must be more open"

Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000. Lexis Nexus Academic Universe. 6 Dec.

Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

Thomas, Judy. "Vibrant leader kept AIDS secret" Kansas City Star. 30 January 2000.

Lexis Nexus Academic Universe. 6 Dec. Keyword: AIDS and Catholic Priests.

