

## AIDS in America

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 24, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

The International AIDS Conference is going on in Washington this week. Two articles caught my attention, and kept it, regarding the struggle against this still deadly disease which continues to be an epidemic in certain cities, including the one in which I live, Washington, D.C.

This morning, [Dan Zak has an article in the Washington Post](#) [1] about how the disease and, more importantly, socio-cultural reactions to the disease, have changed since D.C.'s first conference on AIDS on April 4, 1983. Then, scientists had not really discovered much about HIV/AIDS, still less devised the current regimen of medicines that can largely control its lethality. Zak tells the tale of John Willig who spoke at the 1983 conference about his disease, how he and his partner thought that surely they would overcome it, but that Willig actually died three years later. Then, AIDS was a death sentence.

A medical cure, however, is not a socio-cultural cure. Zak's articles details the on-going stigma that attaches to the disease. A young man, aged 23, who has been positive for two years, tells him how he has been ostracized within his social group, and how some so-called friends spread the news of his infection in an unkind fashion. There is still no cure for malice. The fear of the disease has too often morphed into a fear of those who have it, and people who are afraid make bad decisions. Stigma, too, has no cure.

Running through the article is the ambivalence between history and memory. Memory sears. It is painful. It is grounded in experience and, just so, less easily shared. Those of us who lived through the HIV crisis before there was treatment look back on that time with pained hearts. It is as Augustine wrote about the death of his childhood friend: our tears have taken the place of our friends. The emptiness of life without so many friends and colleagues who once filled our lives but died too early from this dread disease, that emptiness remains. At Mass on Sundays, during the Eucharistic prayer, the priest calls us to pray for those who have gone before us, and he usually pauses. I pray first for my Mom, then for my uncles and aunts, and my grandparents, for Fr. Kugler and Msgr. Ellis, and then I start down the list of those lost to AIDS: David, always first because he was my best friend and nary a day has passed since his death that I do not miss his wit and wisdom, Stephen, Damien, Nalty, Bryan, Hooper, Robert, the customer whose name I have forgotten who always had a coterie of friends with him when he came into the restaurant where I worked. I never seem to have time to mention them all before the priest continues with the prayer. As the priest continues, the very next lines in the Roman Canon recall apostles and martyrs: John the Baptist, Stephen, Mathias, Barnabas, Ignatius. The list of my friends who have died, which I am still muttering silently, blends in to naming of the saints. I like that.

History is different from memory. It anaesthetizes. History scrubs memory of its biases, it subjects it to analysis, it de-personalizes it and makes it accessible in ways memory can't. The AIDS conference speakers in 2012 can tell their stories of the early days, but young people understandably have difficulty relating to experiences they did not share. The most frightening line in the article illustrates the dynamic. Justin Goforth of the Whitman-Walker Health clinic said at one of the meetings: "Some people say, "Those kids today, they don't have any fear." That's judgmental, and it seems they want young people to live through what they did. [But] fear pushes people away from what you want them to do." The fight against HIV/AIDS needs history, not just memory, to

preserve what happened and to find ways of making it relevant and accessible to future generations. The tension between memory and history is not unique to HIV. The Holocaust evoked a similar challenge. For the survivors, memory was a burden, but unless that burden was passed into history, human forgetfulness could work its dark magic. There is a reason that, here in Washington, we have the Holocaust Memorial and Museum. It is both about memory and history, a memorial and a museum.

[The other article appeared in the Post's Outlook section](#) [2] on Sunday and it touched on a theme I have called attention to previously, namely, that marriage equality has replaced the fight against HIV as the dominant political issue for many gay activists, and there is something shameful in this. Daniel Tietz notes that contributions to groups that fight HIV and which help those who have it have been declining. "Why is this happening?" Tietz asks. "Overwhelmingly, these foundations' giving is decided by rich, white gay men. And these funders are among the Americans who have access to high-quality health care. If they need them, they have access to life-extending antiretroviral drugs, which have made HIV a manageable chronic illness for many. Gay donors are still giving generously to causes they believe in. While we have seen millions of dollars well spent on issues such as marriage equality and repealing 'don't ask, don't tell,' somehow AIDS has fallen off, or at least moved well down, the list of priorities." I would quibble with his use of the adverb "well." With limited resources, financial and political, it seems to me that the fight against HIV, especially because it now disproportionately affects minority populations, should still be the top priority for gay rights groups. One cannot marry if one is dead. One cannot serve openly in the armed forces if one is dead.

HIV's changing demographic has also exposed the still obvious racism within our culture, and gays and lesbians are not immune from that evil. Racism, too, has not found a cure. In a picture that accompanies the article in this morning's paper, a rooftop bar is filled with gay men enjoying a happy hour. I count thirty-two people in the photo, one two of whom are black. In Washington, D.C.

As Catholics, we cannot abandon the fight against HIV, still less our compassion for those who acquire the disease. As Catholics, we must fight the stigmatization that comes with the disease. As Catholics, our conscience and our attention must be pricked when we see a disease begin to disproportionately affect minority populations. As Catholics, we must fight to preserve the Affordable Care Act which will help make high-quality care available to everyone, not just the rich. As Catholics, called to love of neighbor, and assured that we will be judged by how we respond to the hungry, the stranger, the thirsty, and the ill, we cannot turn our eyes away from this still pernicious epidemic and all the socio-cultural sins it makes manifest.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 12/05/2013 - 23:57):** <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/aids-america>

**Links:**

[1] [http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-2012-aids-is-a-different-beast-for-gay-men-in-dc/2012/07/23/gJQAD2FQ5W\\_story.html?hpid=z6](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-2012-aids-is-a-different-beast-for-gay-men-in-dc/2012/07/23/gJQAD2FQ5W_story.html?hpid=z6)

[2] [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/aids-remains-a-problem-but-is-it-still-a-priority-for-the-gay-community/2012/07/20/gJQADLvjyW\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/aids-remains-a-problem-but-is-it-still-a-priority-for-the-gay-community/2012/07/20/gJQADLvjyW_story.html)