

# THE GAY RESPONSE TO AIDS: BECOMING A RESURRECTION PEOPLE

By JOHN J. McNEILL

**H**OW SHOULD a gay man with AIDS who is facing death process his feelings of fear, anger and guilt, and deal with his relationship with God?<sup>1</sup> This issue is facing thousands of gay men daily. In the United States, over thirty-four thousand people have died of AIDS and hundreds of thousands of others have been infected. The majority of the people-with-AIDS in the past have been gay men, but that picture is rapidly changing and the majority of new cases now arise among intravenous drug users. I am aware that AIDS is not exclusively a disease of gay people. However, in this article I would like to make the point that the theological context for a genuine Christian reflection on the experience of AIDS for gay men cannot be made apart from the broader context of a theological reflection on the experience of being homosexual.

This article arises from the context of my ministry over the past twenty years as a gay priest and psychotherapist with the lesbian and gay community. That ministry during the past eight years has been increasingly a ministry to gay men with AIDS. I have in mind all my gay brothers who have AIDS or who are in danger of developing AIDS, their lovers, friends and families. These people have a desperate need to understand what they are experiencing in the context of a Christian theology and spirituality which will allow them to relate their reality and experience as gay people and as persons-with-AIDS to God's self-revelation in Jesus. These people are the source of many rich insights that could arise only because of their sharing their pain, fear and sorrow and their courage, joy and hope in affirming life and striving to live a life of quality in the face of sickness, adversity and death.

## *Questions of methodology*

Before I can address directly the question of the theological meaning of their experience of AIDS for gay people, I would like

to deal first with a new understanding of the role that the personal experience of gay people with AIDS should play in theological reflection. As Thomas E. Clarke points out in his article 'A new way: reflecting on experience', theology can no longer be exclusively an *a priori* study.<sup>2</sup> There is a new way of doing theology in the contemporary Church based primarily on 'revelatory experience'. The agent and place of this new form of theological reflection is not the professional theologian in an academic setting but the members of the basic Christian community, in this instance the gay Christian community, trying to render an account to themselves and others of their faith in order to inform their pastoral action. Its method is described as

... a common Christian reflection on revelatory experience (including especially 'the signs of the times') interpreted with the help of social analysis and on the basis of Scripture and tradition with a view to Christian action in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, if we wish to know the theological and spiritual meaning of AIDS for gay men, this question has an empirical side to it. We must inquire what the theological and spiritual significance of AIDS is for those who are suffering from it!

There is another methodological dimension to this inquiry which should be explored. The usual question asked in the past concerning the relation of religion and sex has been: what does our Christian faith (the bible, tradition, theological opinion) say about our human sexuality, its purpose and how we ought to express it? There is a second question that is equally important, as James Nelson points out.<sup>4</sup> Namely, what does our experience as sexual human beings have to say about the way we do theology, read the scriptures, interpret tradition and attempt to live out the meaning of the gospels? There is a special need today for a *sexual theology* as distinct from a theology about human sexuality. Our human sexuality has always played a vital role in our life of faith, but until now it has been hidden. Feminist theology has thrown a sharp light on the fact that most traditional theologies were based exclusively on a patriarchal view of reality. We are now aware that a hidden sexism has been part of Church tradition for the past two thousand years. We have not yet become as fully aware of how great a role homophobia has played in tradition, the interpretation of scripture and moral judgment.

The central insight of Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, was expressed in the saying: reality always responds to us according to the question we pose to it! A person who is embodied as a female will thus ask radically different questions from those asked by someone embodied as a male. Consequently, the response each receives will also be radically different. The premise of this article is that there are specific questions lesbian women and gay men ask of reality that differ from heterosexual questions, and that there is thus a distinct contribution to be made to theology and spirituality from a gay perspective. In this article, I will try to identify and discuss some of the principal realms of experience, especially in relation to the experience of AIDS, where gay men because of their sexual orientation ask different questions, have different needs and, therefore, need to work out the special theological and spiritual implications that are involved in the gay experience of AIDS.

*AIDS and the experience of trust*

The primary issue that the AIDS crisis has posed for gay people is the issue of trust. Our challenge as Christians is to allow ourselves, in Matthew Fox's words, 'to experience the ecstasy and blessing that all life is, to experience the goodness of all creation and its essential ultimate trustworthiness'.<sup>5</sup> We all have God's promise that no matter how much evil exists in the world and in our lives, God will see to it that the good that eventually results will far outweigh any evil. This is the meaning of the joyous cry at the resurrection liturgy on the night of Holy Saturday: *O felix culpa*, O happy sin that resulted in such a marvellous redeemer!

Gay men and lesbian women face a unique challenge to their ability to trust creation. Since we do not choose our sexual orientation, we experience it as a given, a part of our created reality. Insofar as our experience of our sexual orientation is negative and we see ourselves as sinful, sick and evil, we will experience a deep crisis in our ability to trust the Creator. Only a sadistic god, a god who inspires fear, mistrust and hatred would do such a thing, not a loving God whom one could address as a loving parent. We can then find it difficult to follow Paul's exhortation in Romans 8,15: 'The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again: it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, "Abba, Father!"'. If perfect

love casts out all fear, it is equally true that perfect fear casts out all love.

If gay people identify with the theological position that what we are in our most fundamental relational reality is 'intrinsically disordered' toward evil, then we have a right to harbour a basic distrust in life. We will be tempted to develop the 'Boys in the Band' syndrome, an attitude of cynicism, self-hate and mutual cruelty.

Over the past twenty years, the gay liberation movement has allowed gay people to begin to move toward greater self-acceptance and self-love. As a result, many began to live their lives with a healthy adult faith commitment to life and to each other and to God. However, the threat of AIDS can lead gay people back into an immature and neurotic faith; it threatens to snuff out any trust or hope within the gay community in a God of love and put us back once again in slavery to a god of fear; a god whom we may obey out of fear, but toward whom, if we are truthful, we feel something more like hatred than love.

A breakdown of our relationship of trust with God inevitably leads to a breakdown of our trust of each other. For some, then, AIDS has become an objective symbol of what they feel to be an intrinsic disorder in their affectionate and loving feelings for each other. All human contact, especially sexual contact, becomes suspect. A paranoid spirit of mutual distrust can enter deeply into our lives, further endangering any possibility of true intimacy with each other. The opposite of trust is despair; despair in life, in love; despair of any true happiness here or hereafter.

AIDS has also added a new dimension to the anger, frequently unconscious, that many gay people feel towards God. If we accept the blasphemous proposition that AIDS is God's punishment for being gay, then we may justly feel rage against the sadistic God who creates humans gay then punishes them with a deadly disease for being what they were created. That anger, when it is repressed, gets acted out in destructive life-styles.

The only way to forgive someone we see as having wounded us is to heal the wound, and then we can let go of the anger. We gay people must take a chance on God; we must risk believing that God is not homophobic even if the human Church is. We must learn to accept our gayness as a gift from God and live it out gratefully in a way that is compatible with God's law of love.

In that process of self-acceptance and in our new awareness of God's love for us, we can then let go of our anger.

At the heart of all gay spiritual life is a process of mourning and accepting our status as exiles in this world. That mourning process is doubly difficult for someone who has AIDS. Every healthy mourning process necessarily involves a period of intense anger which must be dealt with. Many gay people, however, find it almost impossible to get in touch with their anger at God. One dare not get in touch with anger if the God one is serving is a god of fear. If loving parents know how to accept and respond to the anger of their children, then surely God, who shared our human nature in Jesus and had a first-hand experience of human anger, knows how to accept and respond to our human anger. In fact, Jesus gave us a model for expressing that anger in the portrait of the relation between the elder son and the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15,11-33).

Our only alternative, then, as gay people faced with AIDS, is not to despair but to go the other route, to begin the deepening and hallowing process toward true spiritual growth. We must refuse to believe that the God whose love we experience daily is sadistic. We can fight through to a greater trust, a trust of self, body, nature, the cosmos and God. We must believe God's word: 'You love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned' (Wis 11,25).

We must even trust that our death, when it comes, is in the natural order of things and will 'work unto good', leading to a new life as Jesus has promised: 'Father I want them to be with me, where I am' (Jn 17,21). As Matthew Fox asks: 'Who knows more about the beauty of creation and the New Creation than those who have been told verbally and nonverbally by religion and society that the way they were created was a mistake and even sinful!'<sup>6</sup>

As gay people we grow up exiles in this world, orphans in our own family, declared criminal by society and frequently condemned by our Church. We are challenged, then, to transform our exile into spiritual gold. 'My kingdom', Jesus tells us, 'is not of this world'. We must take a chance on God. We must develop a personal prayer life, a direct unmediated relationship with God; for all mediated relationships have been contaminated by homophobia. In Bernard of Clairvaux's observation concerning spiritual

life: 'We must drink from our own wells'. To drink from your own well means to reflect on your own unique encounter with God and draw your strength directly from that source. I personally recommend in a special way a centring prayer form; one in which we enter the presence of God by emptying the mind of all ideas and images, since most traditional images of God are contaminated with homophobic overtones.

*AIDS, the body and mortality*

Psychotherapists are aware that one of the deepest roots of homophobia in the unconscious is the fear of death. The primary instinctive escape from death is through procreation. One is immortal through one's progeny. As a result, lesbians and gay men, since they frequently do not procreate, unconsciously can represent mortality to the community at large.

In the Old Testament God's original covenant with his chosen people was a procreative covenant. They were to 'increase and multiply' until their descendants were as numerous as the sands of the sea (Gen 1,28). And from among those descendants would come the Messiah. As a result eunuchs and anyone who did not marry and bear children were excluded from membership in this community (Deut 23,1). The greatest blessing God could bestow was fertility and the greatest curse was barrenness. But once the Messiah arrived he would establish a new covenant between God and humanity based in the hope of immortality through resurrection. This new covenant under the Messiah would represent the restoration of the covenant of the rainbow, a universal covenant between God and 'every living creature of all flesh' (Gen 9,14).

Isaiah predicts that after the Messiah comes, eunuchs will be accepted as full members in the new community: 'I will give (them) in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall never be cut off' (56,4-6). In Matthew 19,12 Jesus makes it clear that the term eunuch applies to all those who are sexually different and who do not procreate for any reason: 'There are eunuchs born that way from their mother's womb; there are eunuchs made so by men and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'.

Isaiah's prophecy came true when in Acts 8,26 the Holy Spirit led Philip out to baptize the eunuch who is reading Isaiah as he

rides along in his chariot, Isaiah who had prophesied that all who were sexually different would have a special place in the house of the Lord. I see today's lesbian and gay Christian movement as the literal fulfillment of that prophecy. Scripture itself links the non-procreative status of lesbians and gays to the hope of resurrection.

Genesis portrays Adam and Eve, out of fear of death, becoming alienated from their bodies and ashamed of its sexuality. Gay people have always held to half the truth about our human bodies; they have accepted the sanity of living out an embodied existence as fully as they can. They have identified with and celebrated the body, especially in its sexual dimension. It has always been the prophetic role of lesbians and gay men to lead the Church and western culture toward re-embracing embodiment, a sense of identity with the body and its sensuousness. We must let our 'word become flesh'. We must give up our dualist, escapist concept of being immortal souls, immortal of their very nature and not through the grace and power of God, encased in a mortal body which we use but do not identify with. We are our bodies; we must learn how to live in, enjoy and celebrate our bodies with gratitude to God.

Now the AIDS epidemic has once again linked homosexuality with mortality and gay people are being called on to give a special witness to the meaning of death and the hope of resurrection. John Fortunato sees one benefit for humanity arising from the scourge of AIDS, and that is to teach us once again the truth of mortality:

If this nightmare brings back to our consciousness the resurrection hope without which life is so much courageous despair, then in the groaning of creation, with tears and sighs, perhaps the Holy Spirit will usher in some modicum of peace or even a corner of salvation, that might otherwise have been unobtainable.<sup>7</sup>

Having had all the escapes from mortality, disembodiment and procreation closed off, lesbians and gay men are left with only one choice: to despair or to trust in God's power and promise and become a resurrection people. In the midst of the AIDS crisis persons-with-AIDS are witnessing to the preciousness of life and to true courage in the face of death. In my own pastoral experience I am aware of the special spiritual peace, joy and trust with which so many persons-with-AIDS have faced the threat of death. It is this spiritual confidence that has allowed many persons-with-AIDS,

while still in good health to give themselves over to celebrating life and enhancing its quality for themselves and others by works of compassion.

AIDS, then, has been the catalyst speeding up the process by which gays and lesbians are breaking into history with a new positive self-consciousness. They are becoming aware that the God they worship is a God of love who does not want their self-hatred but wants them to celebrate their existence in the warm embrace of God's love.

### *AIDS and God's judgment*

We can be absolutely certain of one thing: *AIDS is not God's will for anyone!* Those who seek to read into the AIDS epidemic God's judgment of and punishment for homosexuals reveal, first of all, their own homophobic prejudice and thinly veiled hatred of gays. Further, they reveal their ignorance of the God whom Jesus revealed. Jesus stressed that God is a loving and merciful parent who does not punish children, especially for something over which they have no choice.

Jesus on several occasions repudiated the notion that God brings down physical punishment on earth for supposed sin: 'Do you suppose,' he once said of men killed in an accident in the temple, 'these Galileans who suffered like that were greater sinners than other Galileans? They were not, I tell you' (Lk 13,2-3). There are evangelists today who would lead lesbians and gays back into worship of a pagan god of fear and demand that they sacrifice their life of sexual intimacy in order to escape fear of God's punishment.

On one occasion his disciples asked Jesus about the fate of a man who was born blind: "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to be born blind?'" "Neither he nor his parents sinned," Jesus responded, "he was born blind so that the work of God might be displayed in him"' (Jn 9,2-3). The work of God that Jesus referred to was his own mission as 'light of the world'. Jesus mixed his spittle with mud and touched the blind man's eyes and he was cured.

In the light of Jesus's teaching, the only true question to ask is: what work of God is being achieved in the suffering and death of persons-with AIDS? I certainly do not presume to have a definitive answer to that question! In fact the answer probably varies with each individual involved. There is the 'work of God' which has to



do with the personal journey of every individual with AIDS through life and death to their own personal encounter with the God of love and their own final option.

But there are also some hints of God bringing good out of the evil of AIDS in this world and in our history. Among these as we have already seen is a renewed awareness and acceptance of our mortality and, consequently, a more intense awareness of the preciousness and quality of life. From a medical viewpoint we can hope for a scientific breakthrough in the treatment of virus infections. In terms of gay and lesbian liberation, AIDS has had the paradoxical result that gay love has come out of the closet.

I remember before AIDS fearing that lesbian and gay liberation would never produce a fundamental change in social attitudes because so many exceptional gay people of whom I was aware were so deeply hidden in the closet. But AIDS has frequently torn these people out of their closet. I think of the hundreds of gay couples whose love for each other would have remained hidden but whose selfless love and devotion to each other unto death is now played out publicly in the AIDS wards of hospitals and hospices all over the land.

I now have real founded hope that this new public awareness of gay people and their loving relationships will eventually lead to a full acceptance of gay couples as equals to their heterosexual counterparts in both society and the Church.

The one clear and certain response that Jesus did make to the victims of disease in his day, such as the lepers, was certainly not one of judgment and condemnation, but a response of compassion. When he encountered people with leprosy, he listened to them, touched them, healed them. 'A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees: "If you want to," he said, "you can cure me!"' Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. "Of course I want to!" he said, "Be cured." And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured' (Mk 1,40-44).

The person with AIDS needs above all else someone who is willing to touch him; someone who can listen and will not run away when he needs to vent his anger or when he needs to share his fear and despair. We should remember the question Jesus asked of his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane: 'Could you not watch one hour with me?' (Mk 14,37).

AIDS, then, has become a sign of the times, a sign of contradiction. Those who were formerly seen as the outcasts, despised and

rejected, have become the centre of the eternal drama of God's love reaching out in a special way to the *anawim*. And we are all challenged to lay aside our prejudices and listen carefully to the self revelation God is making through persons-with-AIDS. 'It is the Lord Yahweh who speaks, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: there are others I will gather besides those already gathered' (Isai 56,8).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The ideas in this article are developed more fully in my new book *Taking a chance on God: liberating theology for gays, lesbians, and their lovers, families and friends* which will be published in October 1988 by Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup> Clarke, Thomas E.: 'A new way: reflecting on experience' in James E. Hug (ed), *Tracing the spirit: communities, social action and theological reflection*, (Paulist Press, 1983), pp 18-50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 22, footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, James: *Between two gardens: reflection on sexuality and religious experience* (The Pilgrim Press, New York, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Matthew: 'The spiritual journey of the homosexual . . . and just about everybody else!' in Robert Nugent (ed), *A challenge to love: gay and lesbian Catholics in the Church* (Crossroads, New York, 1984), pp 189-204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 197.

<sup>7</sup> Fortunato, John: *AIDS: the spiritual dilemma* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1987), pp 85-86.