

Joy of Gospel is also for people affected by AIDS

Vincent Manning

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

IN *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) Pope Francis leaves us in no doubt as to our obligation to include everyone: "The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded." (EG 23)

Francis continues: "Above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked" should be prioritised for our care and concern (EG 48).

One hundred thousand people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWH) in the UK today are surely included in this category. HIV affects the poorest people in our society disproportionately, many live on welfare benefits, are refugees, in debt and in housing need. Despite medical advances many still suffer with debilitating sickness and die at a younger age than in the general population. They are often isolated and alone, despised by others because stigma and prejudice persist, and sadly, they are generally overlooked in our churches.

The stigma that surrounds HIV in our churches, means that Christian PLWH are excluded from the Gospel invitation "to respond to the God of love who saves us" (EG 39). For many, infected and affected, stigma, judgement, silence, or simple ignorance in our communities effectively cancels out this invitation of which Pope Francis writes: "Under no circumstances can this invitation be obscured!" (EG 39)

Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support (CAPS) exists to ensure that the Gospel invitation is extended to all people affected by HIV in our country. Through our national HIV peer support ministry and peer support groups in London, Essex and Manchester, we enable PLWH who are Christians to embody Christ for each other.

Living with HIV remains challenging, and people are always deeply shocked by the trauma of an HIV diagnosis. HIV is also distressing for the person's parents, siblings, children and friends, when they are told.

The help and understanding offered during this time by people who understand the fears, anx-

ieties and problems that come up, because they themselves have lived with HIV, can be especially healing. Through our networks we offer pastoral support, listening, understanding, acceptance, material help, and most impor-

tantly, spaces for prayer and Christian fellowship. Opportunities in community where "faith itself in the crucified and risen Jesus is renewed, where the most profound questions and daily concerns are shared, where deep-

er discernment about our experiences and life itself is undertaken in the light of the Gospel" (EG 77).

HIV also presents challenges to faith. Yet, research and experience show that HIV can lead

to a deepening of faith and a strengthening of belief in God, who invites us constantly towards love. When empowered, Christian PLWH can embody the personal encounter with Christ, for each other: to calm fears; offer hope; enact the love of God; and open the way to healing.

CAPS members are also involved in events to promote awareness. Stigma remains the single most powerful obstacle to adequate care and support, and contributes to the rise in new HIV infections. Stigma and ignorance are best overcome when people confront the realities of HIV in their parishes, schools, colleges, and work-places. CAPS members help our wider Catholic family to do this, through workshops, talks and liturgy. We also partner with secular agencies, to assist them in their understanding of Christian faith. We are a Christian presence in the secular world of HIV.

CAPS is a totally volunteer run charity. Remarkably, we provide the only national Christian pastoral response for those diagnosed with HIV. The Catholic Church is respected as a key player in the response to HIV and AIDS internationally. So too, in this country, CAPS members hope that anyone living among us, infected or affected by HIV, will know that our Church wishes to include them and cares about them. As Pope Francis reminds us: "There is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards." (EG 195)

■ Vincent Manning is the chair of CAPS. The charity is part of CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network). For more information about CAPS please visit our website: www.caps-uk.org/

■ To donate go to www.caps-uk.org/funding.htm and click on 'donate' or make a cheque payable to 'CAPS' and send c/o 4 Thring House, Stockwell Rd., London SW9 9EU



Challenges to faith – Raising Awareness at the International AIDS Conference at the Catholic University of America USA 2012

Picture: CSAN