

REACHING OUT TO THOSE WITH AIDS - A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

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A woman travels from a small town to visit someone in need. As she makes the journey, she wonders what she will find at the end of the trip but feels that she's responding to God's call by making the choice to travel, no matter what the outcome of her voyage may be.

One woman who took such a journey was Mary of Nazareth. She made her way on foot from her hometown of Nazareth to Ein Karem to visit her pregnant cousin Elizabeth after saying yes to the call of the angel Gabriel. Scholars tell us that this trip was 1,336 feet uphill in dangerous mountainous territory sometimes rife with bandits. Joseph may have gone with her although there's no mention of him in the Bible. Mary traveled with some excitement since she'd just found out her cousin was with child, but she must have also felt trepidation, wondering about the implications of what she'd said yes to and not knowing what the future would bring for her and her child.

Hundreds of years later, Sr. Carol Baltosiewich, a Franciscan sister who was working as a home health care nurse in the 1980's, was assigned to drive from Belleville, IL, to rural Randolph County near St. Louis to visit a patient. She hadn't been given much information about him and wondered why her boss had sent her on an hour-long journey for a home visit. Her response to the person she found in his childhood home at the end of her journey and his health situation would change the trajectory of her life and cause her to confront very different challenges than Mary did.

The patient had moved home from New York where he'd danced with the Joffrey City Ballet, so he'd been an athletic healthy man not too long before Sr. Carol met him. Now he was wasting away. As a former ICU nurse, she expected to solve health problems. She helped his parents fill out insurance forms, find doctors who would see him and navigate the health care system. Other than that, there wasn't much Sr. Carol could do. The young man, whom she'd later find out was suffering from AIDS, died of the disease less than six weeks after she met him.

Sr. Carol's reaction to this experience was a desire to educate herself about the illness he'd had. When she shared her struggle with Sr. Mary Ellen, a fellow Franciscan who'd been working in pastoral care, she discovered they'd had a similar feeling of not knowing where to turn. Sr. Mary Ellen decided to call her nephew, a gay young man who lived in Atlanta, to ask for advice. He suggested they go somewhere with a large gay population to learn about the disease. Soon after, they found themselves in New York City to do just that at St. Vincent's Medical Center, where hundreds of men were being treated for AIDS.

When Sr. Carol visited men in the hospital there, one issue she was eventually confronted with was how to respond to hearing about sex between gay men. Since this is opposed to Catholic moral teaching, it made her extremely uncomfortable. However, she wanted to emulate St. Francis, the founder of her order who had embraced outcasts and kissed a leper, and so she knew she needed help confronting her biases.

One consequence of her ministry was that she and Sr. Mary Ellen became friends with a gay couple, and she also volunteered for an AIDS hotline where she responded to many cries for help by listening. Her experiences eventually led to the founding of Bethany Place, an AIDS outreach center in Belleville, IL, which provides case management, education, transitional housing, and other services to those in the area who are HIV positive. It was her compassion, her yearning to solve problems, her desire to reach out to those in need and her wish to educate herself, combined with the support of her community, that resulted in the creation of a venue which has assisted countless persons and where people who are HIV positive still go for help with a variety of needs.

Sr. Carol's story is one of many that are told in "Plague," (<https://www.americamagazine.org/plague>) a podcast by *America* magazine's Michael O'Loughlin. Her story is told in Episode 5. These heroic Catholics – among them Karen Helfenstein, S.C., former vice president for mission at St. Vincent's Medical Center in New York,

Dr. Ramon Torres, the young gay physician hired by the sisters to lead the AIDS clinic, and Father William Hart McNichols, a gay priest who was an early volunteer at St. Vincent's – overcame their fear of the disease at a time when many were reluctant to be in the presence of people with AIDS much less to touch them for fear of catching it. One entire parish (Most Holy Redeemer) in the heart of the Castro district of San Francisco, transformed itself in order to provide pastoral care to those in its midst affected by the crisis. The brave Catholics portrayed in the podcast overcame their fear and struggled with Church teaching on condom use for gays who are active sexually, in order to respond to these outcasts of the '80's with love.

Jesus always, always calls us to love. This love sometimes requires us to do things which are difficult, such as take care of a sick spouse, disagree with a friend who has made a racist or homophobic remark, or reach out to people who make us feel uncomfortable because in some way they are not like us. We know this love is always merciful and compassionate. I'm grateful for the many heroes and heroines portrayed in O'Loughlin's podcasts for providing us with responses of love which challenge us to be more Christ-like.