

The “Style of God”

A message for the First Sunday of Advent and
World AIDS Day



When I was a young Jesuit Novice only twenty years old, I was placed on “experiment” as we called it, at St Vincent’s Hospital’s Palliative Care Ward. Many of the young men there who had HIV/AIDS were not much older than I. I recall vividly one of them, we’ll call him Tom. Even in his stricken state, he was fun and self-deprecating. He also enjoyed gently teasing me as a pious and naïve Novice.

I particularly remember his family coming to visit him in Ward 17 South for the first time. They were a staunchly Catholic family. On that visit they discovered two things for the first time: that their beloved son was dying of AIDS and that he was also gay. This combined in such a way as to overwhelm them.

Tom and his father had a stiff and formal interaction even at his deathbed. I found myself wishing that he would just tell his son that he loved him. I let them be and walked out of the room. When his father then left the ward and turned the corner where I was standing outside, this large besuited man fell on my shoulders wrapping his heavy arms around me. He quietly sobbed. I held him for some time until he stood himself up and regained his considerable composure and moved on to be with the rest of the family.

I experienced something that I’ve felt many times since as a Jesuit: a profound sense of inadequacy in the face of such suffering. All we can ever really do is stand with Mary at the foot of the cross and weep. To do so is itself a grace. So much of what we do at St Canice’s is just that. Words regularly fail us here.

That was in the early 90s and the AIDS crisis had taken so many young lives by then. It was by the grace of God that the Sisters of Charity were the face of Jesus Christ to so many of those young patients and their families. Sadly, at the same time, others in the Church stood back out of fear, or worse still, judged from a cold distance. Shamefully, there were even prominent Christians who tried to block funding for HIV/AIDS sufferers out of a misguided bigotry disguised as faith. Such prejudice is devoid of what Pope Francis has called the **“Style of God”**. He reminds us that style is a whole way of life that is embodied as **“closeness, compassion, and tenderness”**. When words fail, this way of life speaks more eloquently.

By that same grace of God, Saint Canice’s Church and Kitchen has been a place of welcome for so many who have felt that cold cruelty of merciless judgment, exclusion and shaming. It is beyond words to describe the suffering this callousness has caused over the years; lives half-lived, terrible violence and the horror of suicides borne of despair. These tragedies give us even more reason to thank God for the beauty and grace of the good Sisters and their co-workers on the 40th Anniversary of Ward 17 South. They have shown the way to love as God loves us.