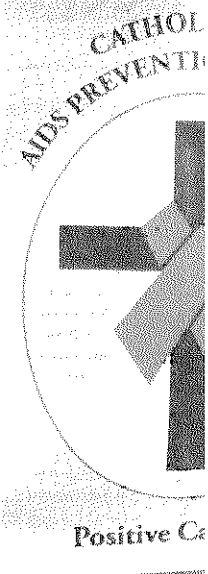


FOUNDED IN 2004, THIS NETWORK OF HIV-POSITIVE INDIVIDUALS OFFERS ITS FELLOWSHIP

Positive Catholics: extending the bonds of Christian love



By John Thornhill and Vincent Manning
Catholics for Aids Prevention and Support

DECEMBER 1 is World Aids Day, a time when people all over the planet pause to remember the 25 million victims of the pandemic which first came to our attention nearly 30 years ago.

They gather in solidarity with the 33 million people who continue to live among us with HIV and Aids today, to hope and pray for a cure, for justice, and for love.

Despite remarkable medical advances in recent years, there is still something about the illness which strikes fear and revulsion in the hearts of many. Those of us who remember the 1980s and early 1990s are still haunted by memories of healthy young men and women, with their whole lives before them, struck down by a cruel and debilitating illness.

We remember the government adverts featuring tombstones and icebergs, and the widespread fears of contagion. HIV and Aids still conjure up traumatic associations between sexuality, suffering and death – something we are very uncomfortable talking about.

In the west, Christians motivated to make a compassionate response to HIV and Aids tend to focus their attention upon the Third World, where the disease continues to claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of people each year – Africa alone has 14 million Aids orphans.

It is right and just that we continue to do all that we can to assist, by supporting agencies such as CAFOD and Progressio, as they commit to helping people living with HIV in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere.

As we approach the end of the year in which the United Nations chose the theme of Universal Access and



A voice in the Church: A delegation from Positive Catholics takes its place on stage at Hyde Park, London during the papal visit in September

Human Rights, we know that there is still much to be done. People are still denied access to basic medicines and care, and stigma and persecution persist.

However, it is a mistake to imagine that HIV and Aids is a problem which only affects other countries; something that is 'over there' and not on our doorsteps, something unrelated to our own daily lives.

Today in the UK, an estimated 77,400 people are living with HIV and NHS testing shows that many people remain unaware that they too are infected with the virus. HIV and Aids are very much among us, an uninvited guest in our house.

In the UK, while the primary challenge may no longer be the prospect of a premature and traumatic death for most people, the virus leaves a deep impact on the lives of those it touches.

Maybe you can imagine the difficult questions you would face if you or someone you love was told that they were HIV-positive?

What does it mean to live with HIV? What limitations will this bring to my life choices? How will this affect my job prospects? Will this damage or destroy my relationships? Will my health suffer a long-term and slow decline? Where is God in this unpredictable journey of suffering?

Where is the welcoming and healing hand of the Church on this hard and uncertain road? Can I still be loved?

When a person is diagnosed with HIV, they will almost certainly feel a certain sense of shock. The stigma which still surrounds HIV means that people can feel that there is no-one to turn to, and that they must keep the news a secret.

Fearful of judgement by others, this can be a time of great isolation and anxiety.

For those who are already disadvantaged because they are poor, or because they are struggling with an addiction, or perhaps because they are a refugee in a foreign land, HIV

can be especially hard to handle.

Some people think they will be blamed by others for the infection, as though it is 'deserved' in some way.

When Sam (name changed), a 30-year-old Catholic, was first diagnosed with HIV back in 2006, he said:

"The day of my HIV diagnosis felt like the beginning of the end of my life. I remember praying, muttering intensely and desperately to God.

"I know at these moments there is something heard in these prayers; like the flickering of a candle, our small, quiet pleas register. It was all I could do. It was all I wanted to do.

"I was haunted by a fear of sickness, of dying, of seeing the distress this would cause my parents, of losing my job and my home, of being alienated from my Church.

"Was this all my fault? Was this some kind of punishment for what I had done wrong? Would I be rejected by the people I loved most?"

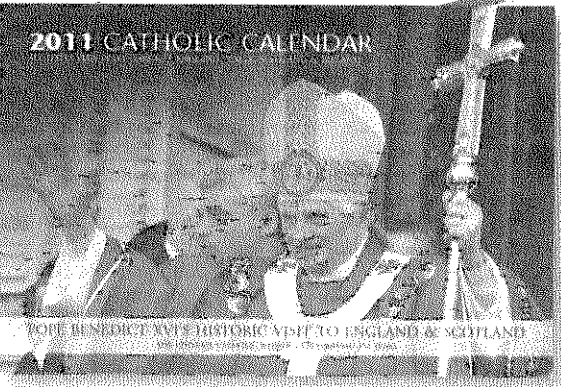
Like many Christians who discover that they have HIV, Sam's relationship with God was suddenly drawn into focus in a new and frightening way, and so he went in search of other people of faith living with the virus. This is where we join the story of Positive Catholics in the UK.

The Positive Catholics ministry began in 2004, when Christians living with HIV identified a lack of appropriate pastoral response and the inability of secular agencies to understand and support people in matters of Christian faith.

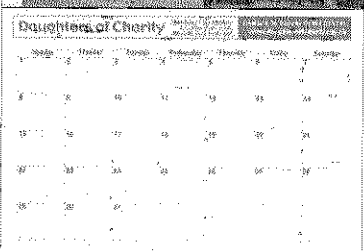
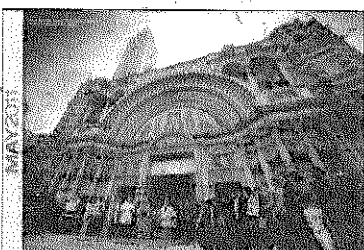
Two Catholic men living with HIV began to meet in the basement of a

Heart speaks unto heart

Visit that touched the soul of a Catholic community



It is appropriate to describe the papal visit 2010 as a landmark moment for our Catholic Community; not only with the visit heavy with powerful moments of history and celebration, but the perception of our Church and of our relationship to wider society was transformed – not least for ourselves as Catholics. Our 2011 calendar features an overview and a selection of images from the visit for you to remember.



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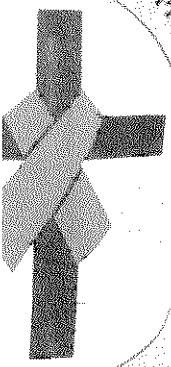
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AND SUPPORT TO THOSE LIVING WITH THE CONDITION

POSITIVE CATHOLICS FOR ATTENTION & SUPPORT



ive Catholics

Stand up and be counted: At Hyde Park



four members of Positive Catholics. Members of Positive Catholics tell of the relief they feel when they are able to meet others who understand their situation: "I have gained confidence and found it rewarding when you open up to others. Sharing stories and experiences have lessened my burdens and anxieties."

This is one way by which people gain the support and encouragement to share this difficult news with friends and family and others who are close to them. This courageous step towards Christian community counters isolation.

Many are burdened, like Sam, with a sense that God is punishing them in some way. An HIV diagnosis can make you feel like Job and that God has abandoned you.

Healing

However, through the Positive Catholics community, and especially at the weekend retreats, God's presence is made real and some of these fears can be confronted.

"I was hoping to be healed spiritually and this was achieved. I have realised that God loves me unconditionally," said one member.

Through prayer, fellowship and the sacraments, the weekend retreats are often experienced as an opportunity for God's love and healing to break through: "I have understood the difference between cure and healing"; "The highlight for me was the healing liturgy. This gives me the courage, strength, and faith to go on."

The Positive Catholics peer ministry is one way in which the Catholic family reaches out to others in need. Christians from other traditions also attend the meetings and retreats, always expressing gratitude for the particular encour-

agement which comes from within our Church.

Beyond the growing network, Positive Catholics also offers an invitation to the wider Church to become aware of and to share in the vulnerability of those HIV-positive people living among us, those who have so much to be afraid of in terms of sickness, rejection and exclusion.

The wider Church is asked to express its friendship with the excluded, the powerless, the rejected and the poor, and in doing so, to build the bonds of Christian love.

In the words of Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Community, the Church is invited to become a "place of welcome" for vulnerable people "where people are transformed by an intense experience of community and relationship".

This is true for people who are living with HIV also. Over the years, Positive Catholics has been blessed with the pastoral support of priests and religious who have extended a hand of friendship to HIV-positive men and women, and the many little acts of generosity of friends, family members and people of goodwill.

In the Gospel of Luke, we can hear Jesus speaking to the Church: don't just invite your family and friends to a fantastic party "invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind" (Lk 14:12-14) because in doing this we extend the bonds of Christian love.

In holding out a hand of welcome to people living with HIV and Aids, the Church can also share something of the joys of the Positive Catholics story. What might you do in your parish?

■ To find out more about Positive Catholics, please visit: <http://sites.google.com/site/positivecatholics>

church in London to share, reflect on scripture and pray together. From humble beginnings, Positive Catholics has grown and the developing network is composed of women and men, young and old, married and single, 'gay' and 'straight', recently diagnosed and those who have lived with HIV for more than 20 years.

The Positive Catholics network is made up of people from Africa, Latin America and Europe, who now live in the UK. It includes people active in Church life and people who have been 'away' from the Church for many years.

In London, Positive Catholics meets every six to eight weeks to share food, prayer, community and conversation, in homes. Little groups are starting to form in Birmingham and Manchester, too.

There are three retreats each year, providing an opportunity for HIV-positive men and women to take time out from their ordinary lives, to pray together, share stories and experiences, fellowship and love; and to discover the presence God in the midst of HIV.

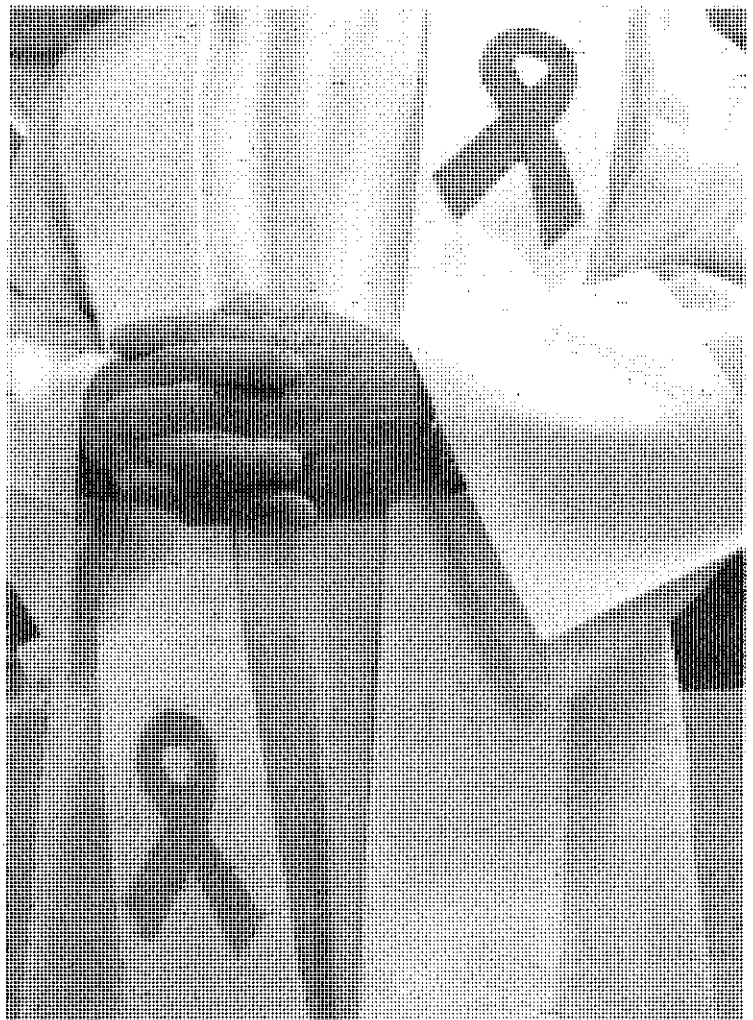
The Passionist Community and The Benedictines offer hospitality. Individuals, and a few Catholic agencies, offer financial support and encouragement.

What is remarkable about Positive Catholics is that it is peer-led. HIV-positive people share their hospitality, fellowship, gifts and talents for the benefit of their HIV-positive sisters and brothers.

In sharing talents and resources, friendships begin; and in beginning friendships, Christian love is brought into being.

There are too many stories to tell in an article such as this, yet we would like to share with you some of the joy which comes from this fragile community.

The following quotes are from



Sign of solidarity: World Aids Day will be observed on December 1 to call attention to the 33 million people worldwide living with HIV/Aids