

A crisis of FAITH

LA IGLESIA'S STANCE—JUST SAY NO!—LEAVES GAYS, SEX AND CONDOMS OUT IN THE COLD

A PRIEST RELUCTANTLY CONFESSES that he counsels parishioners to practice safe sex. A gay, HIV positive Latino leaves the Roman Catholic Church because he feels discriminated against. Both agree that the Church's dogma on sex outside of marriage fails to address the modern lifestyles of its parishioners.

The often conflicting messages from Church leaders and priests result in a crisis of faith for many Latino churchgoers. When a priest advises parishioners—even married couples—about using condoms, he is violating Church policy, and does so at his own risk. One priest who agreed to speak to

POZ did so on the condition that we not use his name and reveal only that he serves a community with a significant Hispanic congregation in a large city in the Southwest.

And while generally his counseling is in sync with Church policy—"If parishioners followed the Church's way, they would practice abstinence to avoid HIV"—privately he does encourage worshippers to defend against HIV and other STDs.

"I tell people, 'If you're going to disregard the Church's position about having sex outside of marriage, that doesn't mean you should also disregard your health and put yourself in danger by not using condoms. Why not protect your-

self?'" the *padre* says, noting that there isn't very much else he can do. "My hands are tied. As a priest, I'm an extension of what the bishop says, and anything I say can be reported to him."

Guillermo Chacon, vice president of the Latino Commission on AIDS, says it's important for people to distinguish between the beliefs and attitudes of the Church's hierarchy, which have recently included false claims that condoms do not work, and those of local congregations. When it comes to helping people who are ill, including those who have HIV, churches are more open about serving their needs. In fact, the Church is,

for better or worse, the world's largest caregiver of HIVers.

Chacon says being able to turn to the Church when dealing with HIV is important. "Faith is powerful," he says. But other factors come into play when deciding where to practice one's faith. For instance, the same policies that tie priests' hands prompted gay HIVer Daniel Leyva to stop practicing Catholicism. "Those in the church hierarchy are out of touch with the churches they govern. But it's important for me to still participate in an organized religion, in a spiritual community [in which I] feel loved and accepted."

Leyva left the Catholic Church three

UNA CRISIS DE FE

Aunque muchas religiones condenan las relaciones sexuales fuera del matrimonio, la homosexualidad y el SIDA, la Iglesia Católica tiene una de las posiciones más duras y recalcitrantes. Esto ha ocasionado una crisis de fe en algunos católicos, especialmente entre gays y aquellos que tienen VIH. A pesar de todo, hay congregaciones que ayudan a enfermos, incluidos aquellos que tienen SIDA.

Algunos fieles señalan que la jerarquía católica está muy alejada de sus feligreses. Pocos sacerdotes conminan a sus fieles a practicar la abstinencia y en caso de no hacerlo, a usar condón para protegerse del VIH.

years ago because he felt he had to conceal his relationship with his partner and because the Church doesn't recognize gay unions. "I need my church to be a safe place where I can be who I am," says Leyva, an assistant director of the Latino Commission on AIDS. He has since found the security he lacked at his Catholic parish in the Episcopal Church, which ordained the first openly gay bishop in 2003 and officially accepted Leyva as a member in January. There, this *mexicano* has found "more openness to the idea that love can be shared by two men or two women."

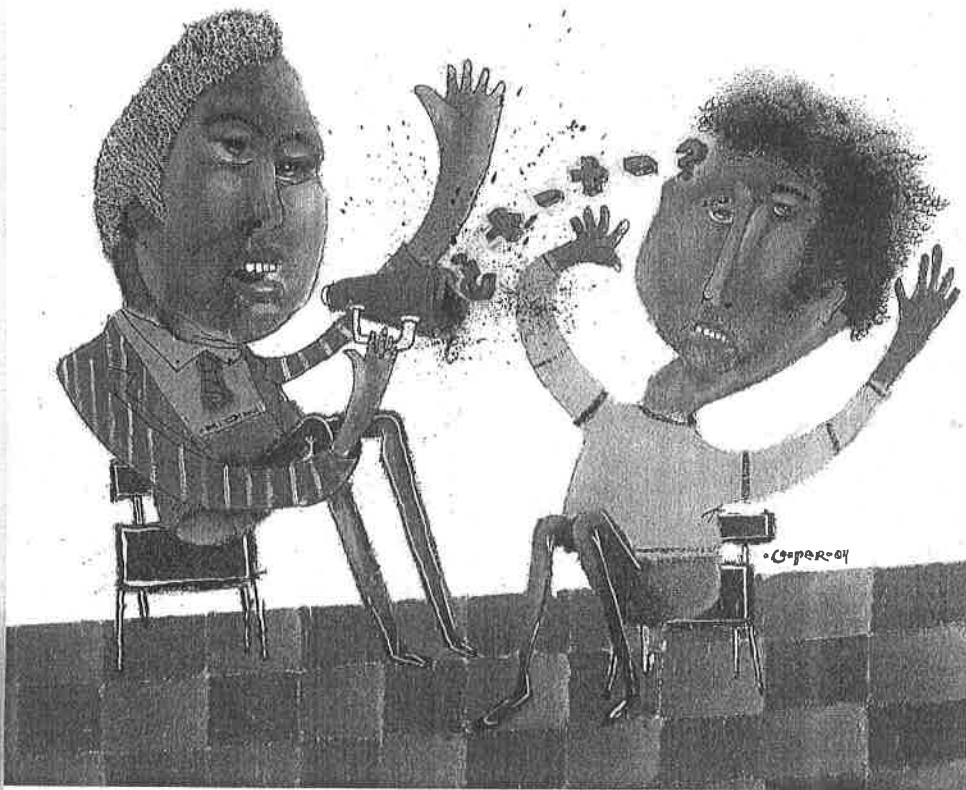
But not everyone is eager to leave the Church. POZ spoke to a Colombian who isn't open about being gay or HIV positive, calls the Church "antigay," still practices Catholicism and attends mass. But he's made some adjustments. "I pray alone. For me, this is talking to God," he says. "I don't believe in confession or what the pope says. I still believe in God, and my religion is a support for me. But I do it my own way." —Debbie Feldman



ILLUSTRATION FOR POZ BY JULIA VAKSER

STATUS Is Everything

WHEN IT COMES TO GETTING TESTED, LATINOS WITH HIV OFTEN WAIT TOO LONG. FINDING OUT BEFORE YOU GET SICK CAN *SALVAR VIDAS*



JULIO SERRANO DIDN'T HAVE A LOT of time to fret about taking an HIV test. Suffering from a persistent high fever, the Mexican immigrant was already in a doctor's office when he was faced with the question of whether to take the test. So he said yes.

Even though he'd had unprotected sex with his *ex-novio*, he didn't know that his ex was HIV positive. And besides, "I thought that because he hadn't ejaculated in me, that I couldn't get it," he admits. That was 1997. Today, the 31-year-old from Mexico City is on meds and healthy—and he encourages anyone who's willing to listen to learn about HIV.

But when it comes to deciding to get tested, Serrano is the exception. Latinos and Latinas are far less likely to be tested for HIV than non-Hispanics, according to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention in Atlanta. Many undocumented immigrants are fearful that test results will be reported to government officials—although this is not the case.

Another reason Latinos are reluctant to get tested is that our community associates a positive result with a death sentence, says Dennis deLeón, executive director of the Latino Commission on AIDS. "People have a very fatalistic view of the prognosis once you test positive,"

says DeLeón, who was diagnosed with HIV 19 years ago. As a result, they put off being tested and often are diagnosed with full-blown AIDS (200 CD4 cells or less) at the time of their first HIV test.

Sadly, health officials say that if Latinos were tested earlier they could begin treatment sooner, dramatically increasing their chances of extending their lives. "Part of the fatalism is an outgrowth of not being aware of the advances in medicines," DeLeón says, "and of medicine and services being available to you regardless of your immigration status." —Debbie Feldman

If you've never had an HIV test, here's what you should know:

1. YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO PRIVACY

You're entitled to receive anonymous or confidential information and testing, regardless of where you live or whether you're a legal U.S. resident.

2. TESTING IS EASY

Testing is simple and virtually painless. A simple blood or oral test is required. You can even test yourself in the privacy of *tu casa* by using a home kit—you send samples to a lab and get results anonymously by phone.

3. PREVENTION IS KEY

Whether or not you have HIV, you need to know the disease and how it's transmitted in order to prevent yourself from getting sick or spreading it.

LA IMPORTANCIA DEL EXAMEN

La mayoría de latinos se enteran que tienen VIH cuando tienen que ir a una sala de emergencias por una enfermedad. Conocer tu estatus serológico te ayudará a tomar las decisiones adecuadas. No importa cual es tu estado migratorio, hay organizaciones a las que puedes acudir para hacerte un examen de VIH anónimo y confidencial. También es importante que sepas todo sobre el VIH para así evitar que te contagies o que se lo pases a otras personas.

ILLUSTRATION FOR POZ BY DAVID COOPER