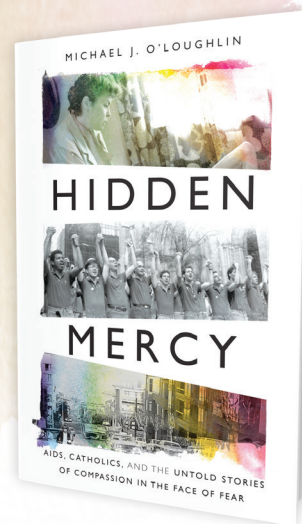


# HIDDEN MERCY: AIDS, CATHOLICS, AND THE UNTOLD STORIES OF COMPASSION IN THE FACE OF FEAR

BY MICHAEL J. O'LOUGHLIN

## DISCUSSION GUIDE



The 1980s and 1990s, the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States, are decades in the past now, and many of the stories from this time remain hidden: A Catholic nun from a small Midwestern town packs up her life to move to New York City, where she throws herself into a community under assault from HIV and AIDS. A young priest sees himself in the many gay men dying from AIDS and grapples with how best to respond, eventually coming out as gay and putting his own career on the line. A gay Catholic with HIV loses his partner to AIDS and then flees the church, focusing his energy on his own health rather than fight an institution seemingly rejecting him.

Set against the backdrop of the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the late twentieth century and the Catholic Church's crackdown on gay and lesbian activists, journalist Michael O'Loughlin searches out the untold stories of those who didn't look away, who at great personal cost chose compassion—even as he seeks insight for LGBTQ people of faith struggling to find a home in religious communities today.

In this book, one journalist—himself gay and Catholic—offers a compelling picture of those quiet heroes who responded to human suffering when so much of society, and so much of the church, told them to look away. These pure acts of compassion and mercy offer us hope and inspiration as we continue to confront existential questions about what it means to be Americans, Christians, and human beings responding to those most in need.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. It can be tempting for Catholics today to view the church's response to the height of the HIV and AIDS crisis as inevitable: a high-profile public health crisis, a mandate to serve the most marginalized, and social justice-oriented Catholics responding with care and compassion. But the reality, as we've read, was quite different. Most people wanted nothing to do with HIV and AIDS. Are there issues today that involve a similar dynamic? Which social ills or societal challenges deserve more recognition? Have you seen examples of Christians responding? How?
2. Sister Carol and Father Bill, plus others profiled in *Hidden Mercy*. They could have done nothing, choosing to focus their energy elsewhere. But they didn't. What were their motivations for taking action? Is there something in their faith that compelled them? What was unique about their responses to AIDS? Do their ministries provide ideas for responding to other crises? Are there universal lessons to be learned from their stories?

3. When US bishops debated the church's response to AIDS—"The Many Faces of AIDS" versus "Called to Compassion and Responsibility"—there was a marked shift in how church leaders engaged society. Previously, they had urged Catholics and all people of good will to be active participants in difficult societal challenges, perhaps even working alongside others who held wildly different beliefs. After the debate about the AIDS documents, some observers noted that bishops seemed to address Catholics exclusively, reminding them of their church's moral beliefs and, in some ways, limiting how Catholics might respond. How do you see this shift playing out today? How can Catholics, as well as other Christians, contribute to public life in an increasingly multicultural society?
4. Consider the approaches to HIV and AIDS of three of the bishops profiled in *Hidden Mercy*: Cardinal John O'Connor of New York, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, and Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco. How were they similar? Different? Did any approach seem more fruitful? Were there elements of all three approaches that were helpful? Harmful? What would you like to see today's church leaders emulate?
5. The individuals profiled in *Hidden Mercy* each have unique faith journeys. James Cappelman said he isn't sure if he's Catholic today. David Pais said he's left and returned a few times. Ramon Torres said he respected parts of Catholicism but couldn't stay as a gay man. Do you see elements of your own faith journey reflected in any of the people featured in *Hidden Mercy*? Who? Why? What do their stories offer people who struggle with their faith?
6. Father Jim Noone, from his experience in 1987 in Chicago, stated, "The hierarchical statements basically have very little to do with day-to-day things in the parish. When people are in need, people in the parish want to do what they can to respond." Does this ring true in your own experience? Can we identify examples of when the church has promoted compassion and inclusion? Are there times individuals seem to be more welcoming and understanding than the church institution or the verbiage used in official teachings?
7. Division and differing opinions have existed since the beginning of the church. How does this division hinder the church's message of love and inclusion for all? How has it cost lives, caused pain, driven souls away? Give examples from the AIDS crisis as well as more recent divisions (response to COVID, immigration, LGBT issues, etc.). How can we work to create greater unity and harmony?
8. People who respond bravely in the face of suffering and injustice are often all too few in times of crisis. Sadly, those same generous, compassionate souls are often maligned or even punished for their efforts. Look at the examples of courageous and loving service found in this book. What qualities do they display? Can you think of people in our own time who display those same qualities? How can you become more bravely loving in combating injustice?
9. Sister Carol, in her experience working with people with AIDS in New York City, focused on one rule: "Before you can effectively minister to anyone with HIV or AIDS, you need to look at your own biases and make sure you're seeing the person in front of you, not their disease or how they contracted HIV." This is a rule that could be adopted in many life situations and interpersonal relationships. Discuss how this rule impacted the work of Sister Carol and others highlighted in this book. When in your own life have you found this rule necessary or beneficial?

10. Let us look at the suffering of those in the LGBT community during the AIDS epidemic. Much of the misinformation and judgment toward the gay community was fostered by messaging from religious leaders. Was the Catholic Church at that time living out its most profound social justice principle—the dignity and worth of every person? What is the messaging of the church toward the LGBT community in the present day? Are we encouraging persons to remain in the church? Father Bryan Massingale states in the book that the church will not be just until LGBT Catholics feel that we can “confidently and insistently proclaim that we are equally redeemed by Christ and radically loved by God.” How could we better welcome all into the embrace of love proclaimed by Jesus Christ?
11. One of Sister Carol’s friends, Jim D’Eramo, said, “Without your history, you don’t have an identity.” Discuss the role that uncovering history plays in forming an identity. Do you agree with Jim’s assertion? What other histories are important to forming identities?



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J. O’Loughlin is an award-winning journalist and the national correspondent for America Media. He is the host of the podcast *Plague: Untold Stories of AIDS and the Catholic Church*, recommended by *The New York Times* and featured on NPR. Prior to joining *America* magazine, O’Loughlin was a national reporter for The Boston Globe. He has written for *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *The Advocate* and has been featured on MSNBC, Fox News, ABC, CBS, and NPR. He lives in Chicago.

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