

Stewardship sermon

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

The Alexian Brothers established Bonaventure House some years ago as a place of refuge, spiritual care and healing of many sorts for people afflicted with AIDS. Almost 40 people suffering from the disease are under its roof, and many more have been taught how to care for themselves in independent living.

I know that others, both Christian and non-Christian, support many such causes, but it's good, from time to time, to pause and single out particular ones. This one interests me particularly because of the ambiguity such a ministry has created in the minds of many churchpeople.

Bonaventure House honors St. Bonaventura, whose name means "good luck"—an ironic phrase for people who suffer bad health. Certainly, the Alexian Brothers never trusted to luck when they established the place.

In faith, they took risks before much was known about whether or not care-givers would become infected with the AIDS virus. The Brothers stood in an ancient and medieval tradition: when the plague came to Europe, members of the medical and the religious professions were expected to remain in town and at the bedside of affected people. They were part of a tradition represented in extreme form by the parabolani, "the reckless ones." "In the Eastern Church from 3rd to 5th c. [this was the] name of a class of lay helpers who attended upon the sick in the plague," says the Oxford English Dictionary.

The "reckless" Alexian Brothers took risks not only of illness but of disapprobation. Some Christians, in the name of a faith they were thereby contradicting, judged those who were victims of AIDS and refused to care for them. Some, in the name of the Jesus who healed without asking questions about how people came to be diseased or disabled (e.g., Luke 13:2-3), scorned as immoralists those who had AIDS. Not the Alexian Brothers, their supporters or the dwellers at Bonaventure House, where they have formed a community of acceptance and care.

So Bonaventure House is driven by faith, but it welcomes the support also of people who, metaphorically, may be in "park" or "reverse" or "neutral" in respect to faith.

They, too, are called by the vision of need and the impulse to love.

I got involved with Bonaventure House through my wife, Harriet, who is a musician. She became part of a circle of friendship that included our Riverside neighbor, Susanne Mentzer. On occasion I get to hear Susanne rehearse songs as Harriet accompanies her in a "studio" under my study. (I hope columns written to such music impart a special cheer.)

Susanne became interested in Bonaventure House through the chance and good luck of being seated on a transatlantic flight next to Bob Rybicki, then the executive director. He told his story well. She and her opera friends have been donating their talents to Jubilate, a fund-raising gala for the charity, ever since. And I had the good fortune to become part of the event through her.

We all become involved with causes by chance and pursue them by choice. This column is my stewardship sermon for the end-of-year giving season now upon us.