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Scarlet Ribbons: A Priest with AIDS

by Rosemary Bailey

Published by *Serpent's Tail*, 216 pp. with photographs

REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER BYRNE

Simon Bailey was ordained in the Anglican church in 1982, was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1985 and died in November 1995. He has the distinction of being the first Anglican priest who not only was openly gay, but living openly with AIDS. Other gay priests, HIV-positive or not, generally were asked to resign when they came out. That he was able to remain a priest in the tough mining parish of Dinnington, is still more remarkable. In addition, Father Bailey was an outspoken supporter of the ordination of women as priests.

Rosemary Bailey, the author, is Simon's older sister. Their father was a fundamentalist Baptist preacher who was also a socialist. In rebellion, Rosemary rejected God altogether and Simon became a liberal, high Anglican priest. *Scarlet Ribbons* is as much about Rosemary's coming to terms with Simon as it is with Simon's coming to terms with being gay and living with AIDS.

Simon was no activist in the traditional sense. He felt strongly that his primary purpose in life was to minister to his parish. As a result, he revealed both his sexuality and his serostatus gradually, until he became the subject of a documentary in the BBC's *Everyman* series and had his story published in the *Sheffield Star* under the headline, "Vicar dying from AIDS." He had almost no contact with the local gay community, told no one about his lovers (after he died, his sister found only one photo of any of his lovers out of hundreds of photos), and refused to seek assistance from the local AIDS service organization.

Even after having a Hickman tube attached, he gave himself all of his own medications and relied on his parishioners and family for care as he became ill. Still, he made no secret of the fact that he was sexually active and that he traveled out of the parish to gay clubs in towns where he was not known. That this attitude flew in the face of the Church of England's position on homosexuality was part of Simon's anger at the idea that straight priests could marry, but that gay priests had to remain celibate. In his journal he wrote, "One thing I should like to achieve in whatever time I

have...is to tell more people—everyone—that I am gay: not merely so that the HTLV III is less of a shock...I want people I'm close to to know that I'm gay and normal—that bit of education, that fraying away of prejudice, I can contribute." He definitely succeeded.

Rosemary Bailey is writing from the position of the caring older sister who is also a journalist. Despite her respect for her brother, his faith and his perseverance, she writes, "But in the end such a story...does not increase my faith in God. It does increase my faith in humanity." Using Simon's journals, his published stories about living with AIDS (*The Well Within*), interviews with Simon, their family, parishioners, members of the Anglican clergy and other journalists,

Rosemary presents a complex life without glossing over her own doubts or Simon's weaknesses.

My biggest concern with the book is that it assumes the reader has lots of knowledge of how the Anglican church works and British culture in general. Also, the amount of emotional reserve demonstrated by everyone in the book, even in the face of AIDS, will be frustrating, if not downright shocking, to North American readers. On the other hand, it was refreshing to read about a priest who was not only openly gay, but also living with AIDS and who used these as a way to spread a Christian message about caring and responsibility for others and be accepted for it.

INCLUDE YOURSELF IN THE 2ND EDITION OF NH/VT GAY LIFELINE

As you may have heard, the Gay Info Line of NH and *Out in the Mountains*, Vermont's monthly l/g/b/t newspaper, will soon publish a NH /VT directory of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender social, religious and political groups; meeting places; community services; and professionals sensitive to the needs of our community. We are particularly looking for physicians, realtors, contractors, mediators, and resources in the most rural areas of VT and NH.

This second edition of Gay Lifeline will be distributed through the GIL and OITM to listed resources and to l/g/b/t communities and organizations. We'd like your help to make this edition even better than the first.

There is no fee for inclusion in the Gay Lifeline, but you can reserve your copy of our directory now by making a minimum \$25 donation to the Gay Info Line. Any person or group who donates \$50 or more will also be listed in the directory as a sponsor. Thanks for your help. Please give us the information requested at right to be included in the directory. Feel free to print out this form and share it with other individuals or organizations who think should be included.

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Thanks for your help and prompt return of this form. If you have questions, please feel free to call the gay info Line at 603/224-1686 or email us at gayinfoh@aol.com

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