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# TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIOUS FEELINGS OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS UNDER CONDITIONS OF LARGE-SCALE DANGERS IN THE CHERNIVTSI REGION

By Iryna Lazorevych

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## Abstract

Solving the challenges facing humanity requires the combined efforts of all humanity using a comprehensive approach. This also applies to the problem of HIV. In particular, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the crisis of marginalized groups deepened and people with HIV began to face more challenges than usual (because their treatment, which requires constant supervision and medication, is at risk). This article analyzes a survey conducted at the beginning of the invasion about the level of religiosity and trust in the church among HIV-positive people in wartime conditions. The issue of the problems of marginalized groups and the role of the church in solving them, the influence of stereotypes and prejudices on the formation of internal self-stigmatization, and the existence of an educational gap in the context of health care as a basis for fear of others is updated.

Keywords: HIV, socially dangerous diseases, faith, war, religiosity, prayer.

## Introduction

“Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;  
A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God,  
which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the  
commandments of the LORD your God,  
but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day.”  
(Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

The war on the territory of Ukraine provoked a number of new challenges, and, as a result, vulnerable populations became even more vulnerable. People living with HIV or members of marginalized groups who require ongoing treatment suffer from drug shortages, displacement, and a loss of sense of security and integrity. However, systems of religious beliefs and convictions can affect people's well-being because the nature of religious pursuits, the level of cognition at which they operate and their ability to speak about the conditions of

existence after death (the afterlife) can lead to a more dedicated, passionate desire to fight and survive.

Currently there are about two million people in the world who have been diagnosed with HIV. However, researchers note that the real number is likely two to three times higher. This is influenced by changing family and moral values, economic poverty, and drug use. Reducing the level of stigma, access to free, anonymous, and effective treatment allows people with HIV to reduce the level of AIDS and opportunistic infections. Ukraine is one of the countries in which HIV is spreading the fastest. Today, more than 250,000 people who know that they have the disease live in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> This complicates their lives because society still stigmatizes HIV-positive people.

HIV raises certain challenges, including medical, scientific, logistical, and structural problems. In particular, it poses a number of questions to the churches. The Bible repeatedly states that God gives us life and protects it (for example, John 1:4; Amos 5:4; cf. Ezekiel 18:32). Therefore, our thoughts on the role of the churches in overcoming the HIV pandemic should be based, first of all, on the theology of life. A truly Christian theology of life will be completely centered on Christ and human existence in it is correctly understood as life before the living God.

Modern churches are also called to recognize this problem, trying to counteract it at all possible levels. In particular, pastoral counselling "Listen with Love" says that "living with HIV/AIDS means living with the fear of being judged and neglected. Branding and discrimination are real and can often be more deadly than the virus itself. The first thing that strikes people living with HIV/AIDS is "self-branding."<sup>2</sup>

Why does this happen?

Because these categories of people are perceived as vulnerable in our minds even though "vulnerability" is not a Biblical word. However, the concept of vulnerability is central to the faith, which finds its *norma normans* in the writings of the New Testament. From the story of his birth to his crucifixion, Jesus is portrayed as vulnerable, consciously treating this vulnerability not as weakness but as strength. So, in the Bible, social injustice is the core of idolatry. After all, God will accept neither cultic worship, nor fanatical piety, unless it is followed by social righteousness. Vulnerability means a call to goodness and openness to God

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics on HIV/AIDS. The epidemic situation of HIV infection in Ukraine as of April 1, 2019. URL: <https://phc.org.ua/kontrol-zakhvoryuvan/vilsnid/statistika-z-vilsnidu>

<sup>2</sup> "Слухати з любов'ю: пасторальний поради́к" [Listening with Love: Pastoral Counselling/]. (Lviv: Drukarski kunshty), p. 60.

and others. And while advances in treatment have greatly reduced the spread of HIV in many populations, making diagnosis and treatment easier, many people only get help in the later stages of the disease, when transmission and serious illness or death are more likely.

### **Presentation of Basic Material**

From the beginning of the Russian invasion, the problem of vulnerable groups, in particular people with HIV, became relevant with new force, because they became even more vulnerable. For people who need access to treatment, it has become more difficult to get it: there are not enough drugs nor specialists. In times of complete loss of faith and motivation, people begin to look for a saving elixir in different ways: some are looking for it in bad habits, some in work, and others are looking for strength in faith.

The churches have long been trying to establish communication with vulnerable groups, including people with HIV. It was in 1989 that Archbishop Fiorenzo Angelini convened the Vatican Conference on AIDS, saying that "the victims are our brothers and we must not condemn them."<sup>3</sup> Cardinal John O'Connor of New York urged at this meeting not to treat AIDS patients as outcasts, not to perceive them as a danger to public health and not to leave them to die.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, the Catholic Church initiated a meeting again: it brought together clergy and HIV treatment experts to discuss "people-centered approaches" to providing HIV prevention, treatment and care services, as well as economic support to those who need it the most. At this meeting, Michel Sidibe engaged the audience in an impassioned call for social justice in response to HIV. Highlighting the latest groundbreaking research on the impact of HIV treatment on prevention, he called on the world community to take up the challenge of financing the global fight against AIDS because "financing sustainable health care is a moral obligation, a right, not a luxury."<sup>5</sup>

According to the Vatican, organizations that are connected with the Catholic Church provide approximately 25% of all HIV treatment, care, and support worldwide. In 2010, the Vatican reported that the Catholic Church supports more than 5,000 hospitals, 18,000 dispensaries and 9,000 orphanages, many of which are involved in AIDS-related activities <sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> UNAIDS requests Pope Benedict XVI for support in efforts to stop new HIV infections in children. . URL: <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2012/april/20120411afaithbasedresponsetohiv>

<sup>4</sup> Vatican AIDS Meeting Hears O'Connor Assail Condom Use, *The New York Times*. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/14/world/vatican-aids-meeting-hears-o-connor-assail-condom-use.html>

<sup>5</sup> UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé gives guest lecture at Vatican International Study Meeting on HIV. URL: <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2011/may/20110530vatican>

<sup>6</sup> UNAIDS requests Pope Benedict XVI for support in efforts to stop new HIV infections in children. URL: <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2012/april/20120411afaithbasedresponsetohiv>

The Orthodox Church also deals with this issue. In particular, in December 2021, a very important meeting was held at the residence of the Patriarch of Kyiv and All Rus-Ukraine Filaret. The Chairman of the Coordination Council of the All-Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, Dmytro Sherembey, took part in the work of the interchurch association, together with the Patriarch and other parties. The main goal of the meeting was to develop a strategy for the participation and support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate in the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ukraine.

Then why, with such support and interaction, are people with HIV often afraid to reveal their status to priests and rarely seek help? Why do HIV-positive people still have so many problems? Among researchers who study HIV-related transmission behavior, this is explained by the stigma directed at HIV, because in Ukrainian society there is an opinion that HIV is a problem of marginalized groups. Stigma, real or perceived, harms the health of people living with HIV. They skip medication, doctor appointments, and avoid testing. Stigma contributes to social isolation and poor mental health, risk factors for substance use, and avoidance of health care –factors that can themselves exacerbate HIV infection.

In addition, certain cultural and social factors are undoubtedly responsible for the spread of the infection. For example, the position of women is a factor: women must remain faithful to their husbands, even if their husbands have other women in their lives; female sex workers working unofficially may not be tested if they do not want to; society is still semi-literate about the spread of HIV infection; fear of discrimination and shame, as well as fear of hindering marriage prospects, keep people silent about their infection. In particular, the information bulletin on the spread of HIV infection in Ukraine states that "young women aged 15-24 are 60% more likely to be infected with HIV than young men of the same age group,"<sup>7</sup> which only confirms that women are more prone to infection.

Unfortunately, in Ukraine HIV is a problem for people living with it. It is often thought that HIV is a sign of people living on the margins of society, whose lifestyle is considered immoral: in schools, children with HIV often face educational prejudices, and people with HIV/AIDS are denied medical care. Public organizations, including 100% LIFE, Alliance for Public Health, Global Alliance, AFEW, etc., as well as church leaders, are working on this. In particular, there is a strategy of churches and religious organizations of Ukraine in the field of public health and prevention of HIV infection and AIDS.

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<sup>7</sup> ВІЛ-інфекція в Україні: інформаційний бюлетень /HIV infection in Ukraine: information bulletin/. (PHC, Kyiv), p. 58.

Today, The Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations unites 19 of the largest religious organizations of Ukraine, which cover about 95% of believers. The Social Service Committee is constantly working as part of UCCRO, which represents and defends the joint position of religious organizations and churches in the social sphere, ensures the exchange of experience, coordinates joint actions in social service and promotes the coverage of social service in the mass media.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it is extremely important for modern religious studies to understand the interaction of HIV-positive persons and the church, because the church's position can both motivate people to accept their status and themselves or increase the level of self-hatred, rejection of themselves and their HIV-status. The war only highlighted the problems of HIV-positive people and the importance of support and motivation at this stage. That is why, as part of the project "Social functionality of religion in conditions of large-scale dangers," a survey of HIV-positive persons who became IdPs in the territory of Chernivtsi region was carried out at the beginning of the full-scale invasion of the territory of Ukraine.

For most people, it is extremely difficult to cope with HIV diagnosis without social support and strategies to reduce the level of self-stigma. The church is one of those structures where people with HIV can turn to for support resources. Many churches already provide support to marginalized groups in their communities, but assistance to people, living with HIV is not as widespread due to the stigma often associated with HIV or AIDS among believers. As of today, there is very little information about the interaction between the church and people with HIV in the country. Even less is known about the relationship between HIV or AIDS, disclosure, stigma, and social support. The interview focused on experiences of stigmatization and disclosing behavior of people living with HIV [hereafter PLHIV], the role of religious faith in the lives of people with these conditions, and barriers to strengthening the role of churches in providing social support. This data provides key insights into the use of churches to improve the quality of life of PLHIV by providing supportive resources.

Questions that arose during the analysis showed that in general PLHIV perceive churches as a source of support. This allows us to hypothesize that people with HIV will seek support from churches, and trust will increase the access to support resources available in

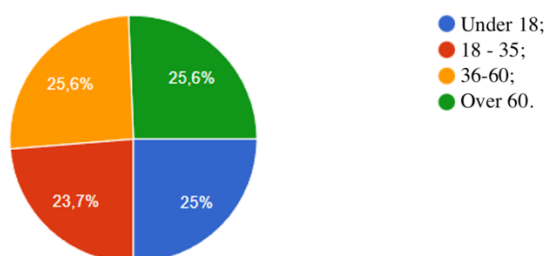
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<sup>8</sup> Стратегія Церков і релігійних організацій України у сфері охорони здоров'я та профілактики ВІЛ/СНІДу. (Strategy of churches and religious organizations of Ukraine in the field of public health and HIV/AIDS prevention.) URL: <https://eleos.com.ua/strategiya-tserkov-i-religijnyh-organizatsij-ukrayiny-u-sferi-gromadskogo-zdorov-ya-ta-protydyi-vil-infektsiyi-snidu/>

churches. However, the negative perception of HIV-positive people by the churches reduced the likelihood of disclosure of the status among those affected by the virus.

The survey was conducted with the aim of analyzing the religiosity of HIV-positive people, the level of trust in the church and willingness to seek help from clergy. The total number of the sample is 156 people. From them, the following distribution by age categories took place:

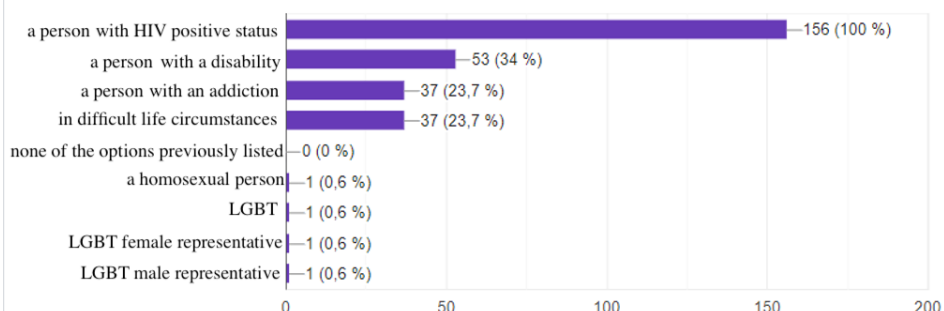
What's your age?  
156 answers



9

Membership to a certain social group was also indicated in the questionnaire:

Do you belong to any social group? If yes, choose one:  
156 answers



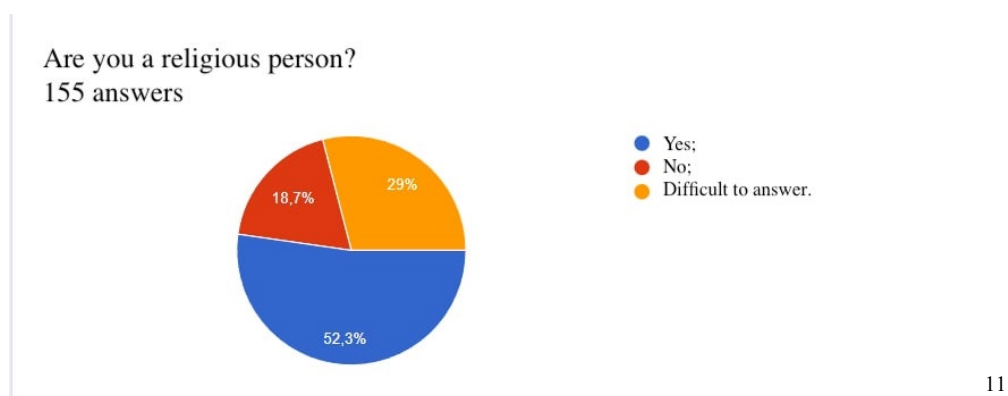
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<sup>9</sup> "Аналітичний звіт дослідження: Трансформація релігійних почуттів у соціально-незахищених категорій під час воєнних дій на території України" [Analytical research report: Transformation of religious feelings among socially vulnerable categories during military operations on the territory of Ukraine]. URL: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ffqpzVxbR5O2Arwtyww8O\\_X1TTEQvw79/view?fbclid=IwAR33itoQ7Fv3zjTZd81MK0f0nF8A19xjfsRVcGxBsEM709v4Zpylh-O7RTw](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ffqpzVxbR5O2Arwtyww8O_X1TTEQvw79/view?fbclid=IwAR33itoQ7Fv3zjTZd81MK0f0nF8A19xjfsRVcGxBsEM709v4Zpylh-O7RTw)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

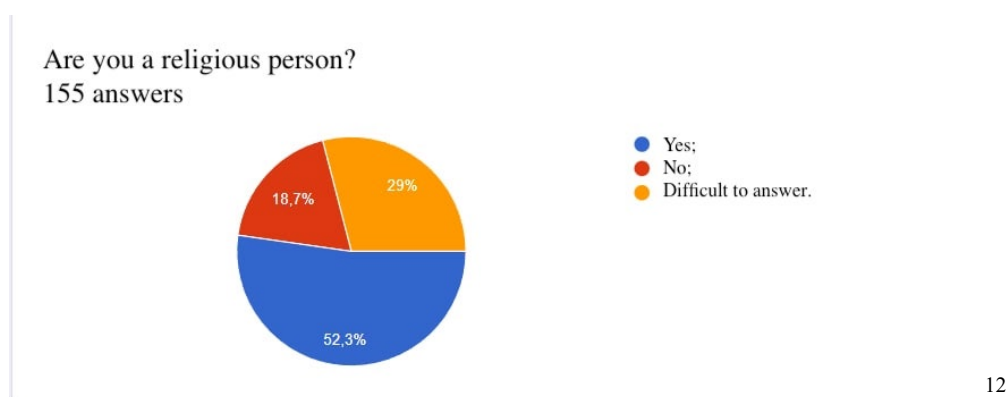
All of the interviewees (see Fig. 2) were HIV-positive. In addition, 34% are people with disabilities, 23.7% are people with addictions, 23.7% are in difficult life circumstances. This allowed us to understand that the sample includes people in difficult life circumstances who, because of the war, were forced to leave the past behind and seek shelter in the unknown.

The next question is expected: is the respondent a religious person? When asked about faith, 52.3% of respondents said yes - they believe in God, only 18.7% said they don't. Analyzing the received answers, we noticed that the majority of respondents under the age of 18 are not adherents of any religious teaching (Fig. 3).



However, regardless of the answers to the previous questions, 78.1% of respondents answered affirmatively to the question about the need for prayer since the military offensive of Russia on the territory of Ukraine, and only 49% of people noted that such a need arose before.

It speaks of the intensification of the desire to seek salvation in higher forces and that in the darkest times, all that remains is to pray.



The issue of the influence of stereotypes and prejudices among HIV-positive people regarding the church is also important. We received only 12.3% unsatisfactory answers to the

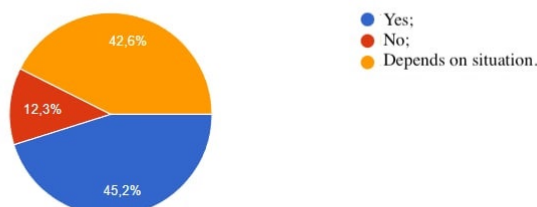
<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

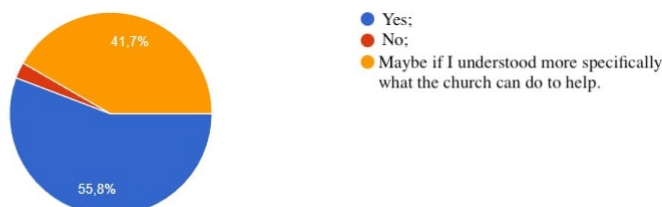


question "Are you ready to disclose your status to a priest?" And regarding the request for help, only 2.6% gave a categorical answer "no," representing only 4 answers out of 156 respondents. All others expressed a willingness to come into contact with the church, regardless of their religious beliefs and willingness to interact. The details can be studied in figures 6 and 7.

Are you ready to reveal your status to a priest?  
155 answers



Would you turn to church leaders for help now?  
156 answers



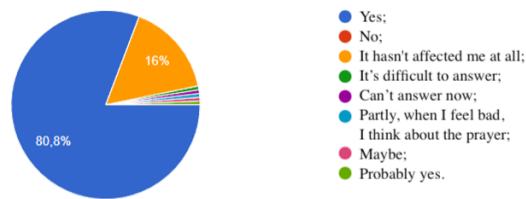
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In response to the question "Do you think that recent events have strengthened your sense of faith in God," we did not receive any negative answers from the respondents, 80.8% (126 people) noted that recent events definitely strengthened it, and the majority of respondents noted the important role of the church in modern realities – 58.3%, i.e. 91 people out of 156 interviewed (Figs. 8 and 9).

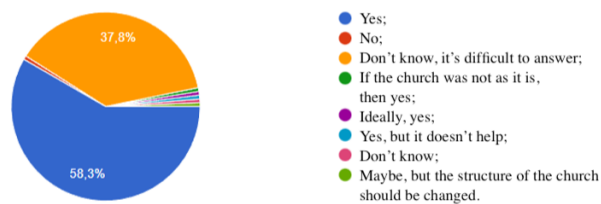
And this is logical, because today the church is also actively working to reduce the damage caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, Caritas Ukraine, a charity organization of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Caritas-Spes is an organization of the Roman Catholic Church, that from the first days of the war provided assistance to those in need, regardless of their religion, nationality or social status. Many Protestant churches have adapted their premises to shelters for refugees, many Orthodox churches have created humanitarian headquarters at their churches and offer other assistance, as well.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Do you think recent events have strengthened your sense of faith in God?  
156 answers



Do you think the church can help people through difficult situations?  
156 answers



14

## Conclusion

The war has had a particularly serious impact on human destinies. The church must respond both reactively and proactively: reactively, by intervening, following public health guidelines to support the most vulnerable people in our communities who will be most affected by war, and actively, by advocating for marginalized and vulnerable populations and addressing war's consequences.

However, despite all the advantages, we can state that there is a certain potential for the failure for development of dialogue between the church and marginalized groups, in particular:

- Lack of clear communication between the church and marginalized groups;
- Certain stereotypes of believers about HIV infection, which have taken root in their consciousness.
- Lack of knowledge about ways of spreading and prevention of HIV;
- Lack of tolerance as a guarantee of mercy and acceptance.

Engaging churches in HIV/AIDS issues can significantly impact efforts to prevent HIV transmission and improve the quality of life of PLHIV.

The themes that emerged during the analysis showed that people, living with HIV generally perceive churches as sources of support. Developing specific support strategies will allow churches to create a supportive environment for people affected by HIV and AIDS, increasing the likelihood that they will seek support in these communities.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

However, analyzing the obtained results of the analytical report survey, we can come to the conclusion that most people everyone prays in war. Even those who did not believe in God. After all, difficult life situations produce lead to the growth of faith in the sacred and transcendent. The target audience of the respondents is people with HIV status. Usually, a person with HIV looks at the world differently. Stereotypes and prejudices that exist in our society do not allow us to feel safe and unafraid of discriminatory treatment. Therefore, the fear of rejection provokes a certain kind of isolation.

Losing home, encountering death, and cruelty change a person's consciousness. When there are two extremes – to live or to die – one begins to believe in God, because no one else can help you except him. The more profound the impact of war on a person – such as the death, injury, or kidnapping of a family member – the more likely that person will turn to religion.

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