

LGBT Pride Reflection
40th anniversary Pride Liturgy of Dignity/New York
by Jeff Stone
June 23, 2012
St. John's in the Village Church
218 West 11th Street
New York City

We have just heard from the president of our national organization, Lourdes Rodriguez-Nogues of DignityUSA, an inspiring homily about where we have come from and where we are going. At this moment, we thought it would be appropriate to note briefly just a few of the highlights of the remarkably eventful history of Dignity/New York. And all of you have been a part of that history, some of you for a very long time, and some of you for a short time, or maybe tonight is your very first time with us.

Many of the important events of our early history were brought very dramatically to life in the wonderful film by Brendan Fay about our co-founder, Father John McNeill, called *Taking a Chance on God*, which many of us saw just a week ago tonight. There are several people here with us tonight who were in that film, although they may look a little different with the passing of the years. Among them are James Osbourn, Clint Winant, Dan McCarthy, Gaspar Rao, and Jim Morris.

From the very beginning of the earliest organizing meetings of Dignity/New York in 1972, our mission has included personal and pastoral support, worship, social activities, and advocacy. The focal point of our activities has always been our weekly liturgy and social, which with only a very few exceptions for weather emergencies and the like has been held continuously every Sunday night, or Saturday in the case of Pride, for the past forty years. We have also played an important civic role, however, as we followed Catholic teachings about conscience and social justice to proclaim our truths not only within these walls, but in the media and in the streets.

As one of the oldest and largest LGBT organizations in New York City, we have been a strong and consistent voice for equality for LGBT people throughout our society as well as in the Catholic Church. In the 1980s, we advocated vigorously on behalf of Intro 2, the city's first LGBT rights law. Father Bernard Lynch, who was visiting us from London just a couple of weeks ago, testified in favor of it before the New York City Council.

After a controversy arose over our right to stand next to St. Patrick's Cathedral during the Pride March, we took legal action to affirm that right. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and was eventually decided in our favor by a 1983 decision of that Court. Tomorrow, we will be standing in front of the Cathedral once again as a direct result of that decision.

In 1983, as the AIDS epidemic began to devastate the LGBT community, members of our chapter, led by Fr. John McNeill and Fr. Bernard Lynch, formed an outreach to people with AIDS known as the Upper Room. Dignity/New York later established a formal AIDS ministry within our organization, which became a successor to that original outreach. Together, they offered spiritual and material aid to hundreds of people afflicted with AIDS and HIV. Ours was the first known religiously affiliated, organized AIDS ministry in New York.

In 1987, the organizers of our city's Pride March honored Fr. McNeill by naming him a Grand Marshal. That same year, we also won the March committee's award for Best Float with our

“Dragon of Homophobia,” which I still remember seeing as I attended my first Pride March, before I joined Dignity the following year.

1987 was also the year that we were expelled from St. Francis Xavier Church, as a result of the 1986 letter from Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, that became known as the Halloween Letter. More than 1,000 people attended what became known as the Exodus Liturgy from Xavier, which we saw very moving footage of in the McNeill film. Members of our chapter responded by standing silently once a month during Cardinal O’Connor’s homilies at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. After that action was stopped by court order after nearly a year, we held monthly liturgies on the sidewalk opposite St. Patrick’s Cathedral for two more years. This series of events became known as the Cathedral Project.

Not everyone agreed with the Cathedral Project, and understandably this was a period of great pain and division within the chapter. Some members formed another New York chapter, called Dignity/Big Apple, which existed for more than a decade. At times there were tensions between the two chapters, but eventually they were fully reconciled, and today, happily, we have many members who have a history with both chapters.

From the 1990s to the present, we have protested efforts by the Vatican and the bishops to promote anti-LGBT legislation in the United States and other countries. We have held demonstrations at the Vatican Mission to the U.N. and at the U.N. itself. Through our talks with Cardinal O’Connor in the 1990s, we helped persuade him to drop his opposition to the passage of hate crimes legislation in New York State. In 2005 and 2006, we signed on as a friend of the court in three legal cases seeking to establish marriage equality in New York State. When marriage equality finally passed in 2011, we rightfully took great pride in that achievement, as one of the organizations that had helped to bring it about.

Along with DignityUSA and our sister and brother chapter across the nation, Dignity/New York has worked long and hard to change the opinions of Catholics on LGBT issues. We believe this has translated directly into growing Catholic support for pro-LGBT legislation. As you may know, Catholics, including Latino Catholics, are now the most progressive of any Christian group on LGBT issues, and a majority now support marriage equality. As everyday Catholics have become increasingly pro-LGBT, we point out at every opportunity that Archbishop Dolan and the Vatican do not represent the views of the majority of Catholics on LGBT issues.

Both the Catholic Church and our society have changed greatly during the forty years of our chapter’s existence. The means that we use to carry out our mission may change as both church and society become more diverse and our communications technologies change. But our chapter is healthy and strong, with one of the largest groups of young people, including many women, that we have had in many years. Rooted in the best of our Catholic faith, we will continue to trust in the Holy Spirit as we carry on our vital work for the full equality and participation of all people, and especially LGBT people, in the life of our church and our society.