

**DignityUSA works for respect and justice for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy, and support.**

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## God Was Laughing: Our Journey to World Youth Day

By Damian Legacy with Blake Bergen, Dignity/Washington



*The author, left, and fellow pilgrim Blake Bergen in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.*

In late September 2009, I was still actively discerning a possible vocation to the priesthood, was in early formation with the Congregation of Holy Cross, and was defending the faith on what seemed like a nightly basis. The adversary was none other than my best friend, Blake Bergen, who happened to be a self-described “agnostic Jew” who did not believe in the Catholic Church, and who continually questioned my faith. And the biggest issue debated was the Church’s teaching on same-sex marriage. “How do you know? How do

you *really* know God exists?” was always the question when the conversation reached a stalemate. “Because I have a gift of faith from God which allows me to believe without needing proof,” was always my simple response.

Fast-forward through fourteen months, countless conversations over the validity of Scripture, tradition, and more often the Catechism, to December 2010, and now the same two students are debating once again the gift of faith, and possibly even conversion. “Be not afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ” was the line I used, quoting of course Blessed Pope John Paul the Great in his address to the young people of the world at the very first World Youth Day event in Rome. Then it finally hit me: a way to *show* faith, a way to make faith tangible to a skeptic, and possibly find a vocation along the way. “Do you want to go to World Youth Day in Madrid?” Before I finished the question, it was clear we were going to World Youth Day and the planning started immediately.

Being quite active at the Newman Catholic Student Center at The George Washington University, I posed the question to our Chaplain about the Newman Center possibly helping our efforts to get to Madrid with a monetary donation. To our surprise, he proposed a different idea: if we led a trip for the Newman Center and opened the pilgrimage up to other students at GW, the Newman Center would pay for half of every pilgrim’s total cost. Gladly accepting, we kicked our preparations into high gear for a group of eleven students and three adults.

As our preparations were drawing to a close, fundraising had begun, flights were booked, and hotel reservations made. This was also the election time for GW’s Allied in Pride, its LGBT Student Organization that advocated for same-sex

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marriage equality, among other LGBT issues. Having already served on the executive board for Allied, Blake placed his bid to become the organization's president, and I its vice-president. After much scrutiny from the LGBT students and their concern that my views of faith and marriage equality didn't line up with what they wanted in a student leader, it turned out that Blake was elected president, while I was not elected to the board.

As it turned out, the students were not the only ones concerned with my views of faith and marriage equality. The following morning, after the election results were made public, both Blake and I received a message from the Newman Center Chaplain asking us to arrange an urgent meeting with him and the other World Youth Day planning committee members.

Concerned with the fact that "a personal struggle of homosexual tendencies has now become a public conflict of interest" would jeopardize the authentic Catholic experience of the pilgrimage, we were given the choice of "choosing a life in the Church and in Jesus Christ, or a life lived in the flesh and lustful desire." At stake was the World Youth Day trip that we had spent so much time and energy planning, or our dignity as two out young men who vowed to be true to ourselves. And so the decision was made to sacrifice the trip with the Newman Center, and instead try to raise the rest of the money needed and salvage our chances of getting to Madrid.

We approached the newly-named interim director of the GW LGBT Resource Center, Timothy Kane, for guidance and any advice in what could be done. First, there was the option to find legal counsel, then go to the press and reveal the injustice, but both Blake and I felt as though that would be inappropriate. We simply wanted to make a pilgrimage of faith, and wanted no political strings attached. Sitting on the coffee table of the Resource Center was a pamphlet for the upcoming 2011 DignityUSA National Convention that was to be held here in Washington, D.C. with the words "for LGBT Catholics" on the front. When I asked Timothy what DignityUSA was, hope was rekindled. Immediately Timothy started work in making contact with Dignity/Washington

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The *QV* (*Quarterly Voice*) is a publication of DignityUSA. It supplements DignityUSA's *DATELINE*, a monthly newsletter. *QV* is distributed in hardcopy, as well as in electronic format to persons on the Dignity News Listserv.

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Begun in 1969 in San Diego, CA under the leadership of Fr. Patrick Nidorf, OSA, first as a counseling group and then a support group in Los Angeles, DignityUSA has been a national organization since 1973 uniting LGBT Catholics, their families and friends.

DignityUSA is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose national office is located in the Greater Boston area, with chapters located throughout the United States.

Members gather at local chapters, periodic regional meetings and biennial national conventions.

The *QV* encourages the exchange of opinions, book reviews, reflections, background information, resource materials and essays and articles by established speakers and professionals touching on spirituality, human sexuality and its expression, and the mission of DignityUSA. Of special interest are personal experiences and what has worked well in areas of pastoral ministry, human and social justice issues, leadership, chapter and faith community building.

Opinions expressed in reflections, reviews, letters, etc., are those of their authors and not necessarily those of DignityUSA.

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Board members Tom Bower and Allen Rose to arrange a time to meet with the Dignity/Washington Board of Directors to see if they would be able to help.

Both Tom and Allen became integral partners on behalf of the Dignity/ Washington community in helping us reach Madrid for World Youth Day. After making an appeal to the congregation after Masses, the Dignity/Washington community made a free-will donation of \$2,075.00 towards our trip, and once again God was laughing at us forever doubting in Him. But the community did not stop at a monetary donation; it offered prayers and other resources, such as legal counsel and/or media outlets should we decide to pursue either of those options. Such was the compassion given to us from the Dignity/Washington community, a community that both Blake and I are now a part of. It seemed that God himself had laid the path to bring us to this community with the full knowledge of what was going to happen, and once again, He was laughing.

With the blessing and prayers from the Dignity/Washington community we started our pilgrimage in Rome where we were able to offer prayers for our new friends in a total of nine churches, including Saint Peter's Basilica, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, and the Church of the Holy Name of



*Lourdes, France, at the foothills of the Pyrenees*

Mary. We pushed on to Paris where we got our first taste of World Youth Day when we encountered a Brazilian group at the Basilica of Sacré Coeur singing and dancing to the simple song "Jesus Christo, Alle-

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**National Office**

DignityUSA  
 PO Box 376  
 Medford, MA 02155-0004  
 Voice: 202-861-0017 or 800-877-8797  
 Fax: 781-397-0584  
[www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org)  
[Info@dignityusa.org](mailto:Info@dignityusa.org)

**Staff**

Marianne Duddy-Burke – Executive Director  
[executivedirector@dignityusa.org](mailto:executivedirector@dignityusa.org)  
 Voice: 617-669-7810

Peggy Burns – Operations Manager  
[Info@dignityusa.org](mailto:Info@dignityusa.org)

Logan Bear – Technology Program Manager  
[webminister@dignityusa.org](mailto:webminister@dignityusa.org)

Jim Smith – Program Manager  
[programmgr@dignityusa.org](mailto:programmgr@dignityusa.org)

**Dateline & QV: Quarterly Voice Publications Team**

Leo Egashira – Publications Committee Chair  
[Legashira@yahoo.com](mailto:Legashira@yahoo.com)

Laura Monroe – Editor  
[lauramonroe57@gmail.com](mailto:lauramonroe57@gmail.com)

Peggy Burns – Proofreader  
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luia.” Notre Dame, the Church of Saint Étienne, and the Church of Saint Augustine were other notable stops before we pressed onward to Lourdes.

However, our journey from Paris to Madrid was not going to be easy. The train company that had booked our tickets for the pilgrimage booked the tickets from Lourdes to Madrid for a day in mid-September. We made the decision to travel to Lourdes and deal with the ticket issue there. We arrived late at night in a town where the



*Statue of Our Lady of Lourdes in the Grotto*

only available hotel accommodations were in a very small, run-down inn where none of the staff spoke English. My one-year study of French was enough to book us one room for the night so that we at least had a place to sleep. On a spur-of-the-moment decision we walked down to the Grotto. We

waited in the line to walk past the Tabernacle and altar and prayed for a way out of Lourdes. We bottled our Holy Water and returned back to the hotel.

The following day was spent mostly on the phone with the train company, and after finally getting the agents to acknowledge that it was their mistake, the best solution they could give was a refund for the tickets. When we asked to book new tickets for the correct day, they told us that every train was full, with absolutely no tickets available. It was time to get creative, and the afternoon was spent looking for groups carrying American flags to see if there was any extra room on their bus. We met with three groups from Philadelphia, Chicago, and Texas, and after high hopes, we were ultimately turned away due to “liability issues.”

The morning came and we decided to leave Lourdes, headed for Irun, Spain, and hoped that we could find a way onto a train to Madrid once we reached the border. As we arrived in Irun, it was clear from the number of pilgrims that were waiting on the platforms that all trains were going to be booked. As we approached the ticket window, we were greeted with a sign that read “closed for siesta.” The only other option was to make our way to the bus window. We found ourselves behind a large group of pilgrims also seeking a way to Madrid. After watching them be turned away, we found ourselves once again with little hope. Direct routes to Madrid were booked and once again the doubt set in. Just then, the woman at the ticket counter asked us how many pilgrims were in our party, because there were just two tickets left to get to Madrid with a lay-over in Bilbao. Three trains and two buses later, we were in Madrid and God was laughing.

Upon arriving to Madrid we were met with immediate graces. A host couple with seven children had an elaborate dinner set and waiting for us.



*Blake, far left, and Damian, far right, with their host family in Madrid.*

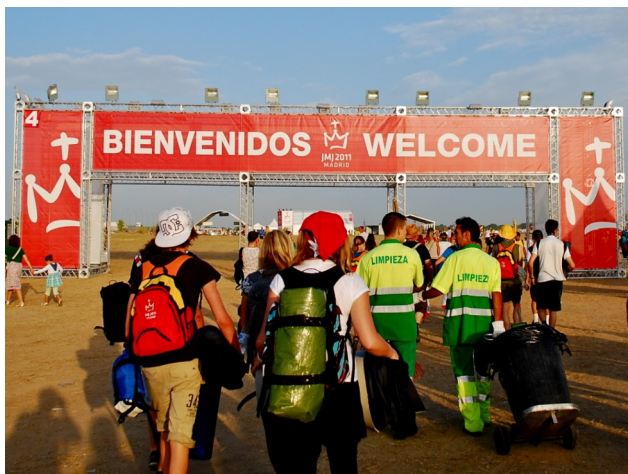
Santiago and Ana, with their children Ana, Marta, Teresa, Jaime, Javier, Ines, and Juan, became our family. Now we had seven little brothers and sisters who started treating us rather quickly as if we were their big brothers. The little ones hugged, pinched,

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bit, and punched us, always with a smile on their face and a laugh at the “ow’s!” we let out.

When we reached downtown Madrid, we saw so much that we had never seen before. We witnessed thousands of people waving flags, carrying crucifixes, praying on street corners, singing and dancing in church yards, and praying the rosary in multiple languages. Finally, after so much stress and worry, we were in Madrid and *experiencing faith!*



*Entering the gates at World Youth Day, at last!*

As the Holy Father drove by the screaming crowds, we were within arms’ reach of the Papamobile and I thought to myself, “This is happening because I have the gift of faith from God which allows me to believe without needing proof.” It was fitting that the 2011 Madrid World Youth Day was the World Youth Day that we attended, because the theme for the entire celebration was taken from Scripture: “Rooted and Built Up in Jesus Christ. Firm in the Faith.” The message of being both firm in the faith and shepherds of faith in the sense of being witnesses for others was echoed in the Holy Father’s homily at his closing Mass. Yet both of us knew that we were leaving Madrid with questions answered and new questions to ask.

For myself, my vocation to the married and family life was affirmed by the joy I felt of being part of such an amazing family and seeing the happiness both Santiago and Ana received

from their children. I know that God will always provide when you seek Him out, even if the path is unclear to you at times. I know that Divine Providence led me to the Dignity/Washington community where I no longer have to choose between my faith and my sexual orientation.

As for Blake, for every question that was answered three more have come up. A deeper sense of spirituality, and acceptance of the idea that faith could be a gift, have since calmed his need for definitive proof of God’s existence, while he still discerns his own beliefs regarding faith.

Since arriving back at the GW campus, the World Youth Day spirit has not left us. I have become the student coordinator for the GW Office of Religious Life and am in the process of forming a Dignity/George Washington University chapter to provide LGBT Catholics on campus the chance to practice their faith without fear of judgment. In addition, I have since become more involved in Dignity/Washington by getting involved in their liturgies as an acolyte.

We are eternally grateful for all of the members of the Dignity/Washington community and for their generosity and hospitality. Wherever the path may lead, so long as we follow the Holy Spirit, we will continue to be rooted and built up in Jesus Christ. Firm in the faith. To God be the Glory.

## Hope: A Reflection

By T. Lawrence



Advent, a season of hope and expectation, is upon us. It is this time of year that we eagerly await and prepare for the birth of our Savior, the true embodiment of hope. Just coming off the Dignity 2011 Convention (whose theme was “Love Hopes All

Things”), and entering into this new season, I offer

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my reflections on hope and what it means to us as Christians.

Harvey Milk was not a particularly religious man, but he believed and enthusiastically proclaimed that, “You gotta give them hope!” Indeed, hope is a vital part of Christian life, and it guides the lives all people who struggle for freedom, equality, justice, and a better life, either socially, psychologically, or spiritually. But can we look at hope without also looking at struggle? Think of the story of Jacob and the heavenly figure with whom he wrestles. The story is a simple one and, like many a life-changing event, comes along unexpected, unwanted, and unexplained. In fact, it seems to stop the narrative of Jacob’s story. Jacob faces change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and scarring in his struggle. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, mystic, and spiritual writer, writes in *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* that, “... if we are willing to persevere through the depths of struggle, we can emerge with conversion, independence, faith, courage, surrender, self-acceptance, endurance, purity of heart, and a kind of personal growth that takes us beyond pain to understanding. Enduring struggle is the price to be paid for becoming everything we are meant to be.” She goes on to describe hope as not a state of life, but as a gift of life, not just a complex theological concept, but a spiritual practice. In this sense, hope is not an absurd existential concept, a dark exercise in futility, a silent cry of post-modern despair, a kind of “waiting for Godot” but a spiritually liberating conviction, a sort of “glorious freedom” as John McNeill writes. This is precisely what distinguishes Christian hope from temporal existential paralysis. In today’s psychological vernacular, struggle *empowers* us. Could the Convention Committee have picked a better theme for Dignity Catholics, especially at this time?

Life is a series of lessons. We learn that dreams end, that plans get changed, that promises get broken, that our idols and institutions (like our church) can disappoint us. We learn that there is such a thing as human support and that there is also such a thing as paralyzing isolation. We often live between the poles of unreasonable hope on one hand, and disheartening disquiet on the other. However, as Chit-

tister writes, when we become fixated on a single vision of the future, the one we refuse to relinquish, however clear its end, that struggle defeats us. To concentrate and focus only on the struggle is to lose the things the struggle is really meant to bring us. Is it really a matter of who won and who lost? Isn’t what is meant to be discovered in the struggle more important? Theological debates in matters of hope are fruitless.

Finally, hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. Chittister points out that hope “...is about getting better inside, about what is going on inside.” Chittister’s phrase “transformed by hope” perfectly describes how we can use this Advent season to transform ourselves, with our hopes and struggles, into the person that God created each of us to be. In doing so, we will be ever more ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the hope for the world.

## On Being

By Laura Monroe, DignityUSA Editor



*On my wedding day*

*Author’s Note: Some names in the story have been changed*

I stuck my head out the window of my parent’s car, with my light brown curls flying behind me in the wind, smiling my pre-braces, gap-toothed smile, and waving to my aunts, uncles, and friends gathered in the driveway. I was nine years old, dressed in a white satin gown, crisp white gloves, and a tiny veil. I felt like a movie star. It was the day of my First Communion.

Looking back, being Catholic was in my blood, and participating in my First Communion is my first vivid memory of over twenty years of growing up in a Catholic family. Every Sunday my parents would rouse me and my three siblings out of our warm beds at 7:00 am for CCE (Catholic Catechism Education), and then we would all attend Mass to-

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gether after class. We would pray the rosary nightly during Advent, the six of us gathered in our dark living room by the light of the Advent candles, and abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent. One of my best friends was Catholic, and growing up in a peer group of Protestants, we felt our Catholicism made us “special.” It was a special bond that connected us beyond our friendship. We attended confirmation classes together, and stayed up late into the night discussing the Catholic Church’s views on birth control, sex education, and marriage. My dad likes to joke that when he met my mom, he thought she was perfect for him: she did not smoke, and she was Catholic.

But being a Catholic was also a very private affair for me. For fourteen years of my life I attended the same Catholic Church: St. Bernadette’s in Houston, Texas. We lived less than two miles from our church, and during the tumultuous years of adolescence, I’d often visit the church two or three times a week to sit in the quiet pews, or kneel in the contemplation garden. I would pick up novena cards whenever someone had left them, and take them home and pray the prayer for nine days in a row. One time, when I was about twelve years old, my mom came home crying because she had lost her purse. Her purse contained a bullet casing from the twenty-one gun salute at my grandfather’s funeral, and it was very special to my mother. I remember feeling helpless and going into my room, turning off the lights, and praying the rosary that someone would find her purse. I had heard, either through CCE, or through Mass, or through a Catholic friend, that whenever you prayed the rosary you would get what you prayed for. If anyone could help us in that time, I thought, it was Mary. Later the next day, my mom’s purse was returned to her, all contents intact.

I started going to Mass on my own on Sundays, after my other siblings had gone off to college, and my parents went to a different Mass. I started thinking of St. Bernadette’s as “my church” and not just the place I went because my parents went. I read through the book of Saints and chose a patron saint for myself: St. Therese of the Little Flower. My parents definitely raised me to be a Catholic, but continuing in the faith on my own, and making it my

own was not something they forced on me; it was something I could not see living without. I felt a kinship, a spiritual fondness with Catholicism; being a Catholic was not something I just did on Sundays; it was now a formed part of my identity.

When it came time for me to choose a college, my requirements were simple: small and Catholic. Being a Catholic was such a natural extension of my identity, so I wanted the place I would live for the next four years of my life to welcome that. A prestigious Jesuit Catholic institution with just over 6,000 students Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. was where I landed. Georgetown has the most beautiful Catholic chapel, Dahlgren Chapel, on campus where Mass is held daily, and on Sundays at 8:00 pm a Jesuit priest comes down out of the pulpit during the homily and walks among the students in the congregation while he teaches. For years and years prior to my time at Georgetown, this Mass time was known as “8:00 pm Mass,” full of students and only students, but also led by students. This “student Mass” included “The 8:00 pm Mass Choir” made up of students and student directors, leading the congre-



*Dahlgren Chapel, Georgetown University*

gation in song. The readers were students and the Eucharistic ministers were students. During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest invited the whole congregation to gather around the altar with him while he consecrated the Eucharist. We then all held hands and sang the Our Father (with a melody written by a student and unique to this 8:00 pm Mass) around the altar, and gave hugs and kisses as signs of peace. We were, all of us, so different. Different in where we came from, different in where we were

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going, in who our friends were, in what we liked to do. But for this moment, once a week at 8:00 pm on Sundays, we were a family, united by our Catholicism and our desire to worship God in this Catholic Mass.

I joined the choir right away. Soon, the 8:00 pm Mass choir and the 8:00 pm Mass itself became my second home. I was in love with this whole process, and never was I more proud to be a Catholic. I felt like I belonged to something greater, and the best part about it was that this “something greater” was being done to worship God, and to grow in our faith. Naturally, in a place so full of love and warmth and the presence of God, I met Eleanor.

Eleanor was my age, a Social Justice major, and from a small town on the east coast. She had short blonde hair that she never had to blow dry—it would fall perfectly anyway—and big, round, blue eyes. She rarely wore makeup (because she didn’t need to) and when she smiled, she smiled with her whole face. She had a beautiful soprano voice, wore Birkenstocks, and liked to run. I don’t remember who first asked who to hang out, only that we went to see a movie called *Secondhand Lions*, which the IMDB website describes as “A coming-of-age story about a shy, young boy sent by his irresponsible mother to spend the summer with his wealthy, eccentric uncles in Texas.” We walked to the movie, because you walk everywhere in D.C., and though I don’t remember what we talked about, I remember thinking that I really enjoyed her company. As it turned out, she really enjoyed my company too. We were inseparable after that.

Before your mind jumps to a “first comes love” story, let me tell you up front that my relationship with Eleanor was never sexual. But it was deeply emotional and romantic. It wasn’t long before Eleanor and I began saying “I love you.” We would write notes to each other, sometimes leaving them on our pillows. One exchange between us that I remember was a note that she left me after I’d had a terrible day: *“I didn’t want to wake you after your long day. Just remember, weeping may last for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. I love you.”* I woke up before her the next morning, read the note, and wrote *“Promise?”* When I returned

later in the day, the note was there for me with her response: *“YES!”*

We visited each other’s families and met each other’s parents. We traveled the world together. We talked of moving in together after college. We held hands, always sat close, and embraced as often as we could. I will never forget our hugs. We held each other so close that we could literally feel each other’s heartbeats. We would stand like that for long moments, letting the pounding of each other’s hearts slow to a calmer beat. We began and ended every day together and we thought it would always be that way. Never did we have any “guilt” about our relationship, because we both considered ourselves to be straight. Never mind that neither of us was dating any men during this time; I had just come out of a terrible breakup with a man, and there wasn’t anyone Eleanor was particularly interested in. Besides, who needed men when we had each other? But never did the word “gay” cross my mind.

When Eleanor and I ended our friendship, it had all the elements of a breakup. Tears, fighting, pleading letters. Days and nights of anger, deep sadness, and confusion. I started speaking of our love in the past tense; in apologetic letters to her I would tell her, *“I loved you so much. You were so special to me. I will never forget our friendship.”* I had, unfortunately for our friendship, become now “very close” with Eleanor’s roommate, Sarah, and, in the way that adolescents (and let’s face it, some adults) are wont to do, left one lover for another.

My relationship with Sarah had all the elements of my relationship with Eleanor except that this one was deeper, longer, and, well, a little more sexual. Still, neither of us were “gay.” *“Every story I tell has you in it.”* she told me once during our few times apart. I was smitten. Sarah had been with women in the past and decided that we should not take our relationship to the next level because it might “ruin our friendship.” Still, Sarah was everything to me, and for two years we danced around the words “love,” “soul mate,” “meant to be,” and “forever.” To be fair, while in my relationship with Sarah, I was not secretly pining away for her, wishing we could be together while she was spurning me. In fact, I was busy trying to get a nice Catholic boy

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to fall in love with me so I could follow the pattern of my family: go to college, fall in love, get married in a Catholic church. I was immensely happy in my relationship with Sarah, and figured why not take it to the next level? When she did not want to, I was disappointed, but I understood. After all, we weren't gay, we were just in love.

I never used to believe it when people would say "I saw her across the room and I just knew." That is, until I met Marena. By this time, I had graduated from Georgetown and was back in my hometown of Houston. Marena and I worked together, and I was instantly drawn to her. When a co-worker let me in on the secret that she was gay, I was thrilled. I knew immediately I wanted to date her. Pursuing her felt so natural, and it was not until I was making her a valentine, and picking up special shampoo for her dog, that the big "L word" really hit me. Was I a lesbian? Was I gay because I wanted to be with Marena? Did it make me gay if I kissed her? What does being a lesbian mean? What does it mean for my family, for my friendships?

I was in therapy at the time and confided in my therapist about my crush on Marena. My therapist immediately dismissed the feelings, saying I was rebelling, that I was absolutely not gay and that I needed to draw clear boundaries with this woman. She compared my feelings for Marena to a crush that a student has on a teacher. Her last question to me was, "Besides, what does this mean for your religion?" I hadn't even thought of that. What did she mean, what does this mean for my religion? Why would it matter to my religion who I loved?

I went home that night and cried, hard. I felt at a point of no return. I could either step forward into this relationship with Marena, stepping into all that meant, or I could run from it. I decided to step in. As I would learn in the coming years, this decision about where I stand sexually and religiously, would be a dance I would have to do over and over again, as identities and definitions of identities were revised, and revised again.

When I finally embraced a lesbian identity at the age of twenty-two, something shifted within me

and the Catholic Church. In short, I felt we went through a divorce. He, the Catholic Church (and I think of it as a "he" because it's run exclusively by men) divorced me overnight. "You are no longer welcome as you are" was the mantra. "Come to Mass, but..." "Come to confession, but..." "You are welcome, but..." I felt I was the same Laura Monroe, the same person who had worshipped in the churches, the same person who sang the hymns and prayed the Advent wreath, the same person who bowed before receiving communion as a sign of humility. For twenty-two years I had nurtured and been nurtured by this relationship, and now this place of comfort and solace was saying things like "Transsexuals and homosexuals will never enter the kingdom of heaven" ([Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan](#)), spending millions of dollars to make sure gays and lesbians don't have equal access to the law through marriage, and pulling out of adoption services in D.C. so that they don't have to allow gays and lesbians to adopt. And the "love the sinner, hate the sin" ridiculousness? Don't get me started.

I'll never forget the day that I was driving through Montrose (a gay neighborhood in Houston) with my parents, (ironically, on the way to purchase a couple's Bible for Marena and me). We were stopped at a light, and there was a man on the curb holding a sign with big letters that read "HOMOSEXUALITY IS A SIN! JESUS SAVES!" The air in the car felt thick. I wished the light would change to green. Did my parents see the sign? What did they think? No one said anything. I was mortified and angry. Another day, another sign: "GOD HATES FAGS". What twilight zone had I entered, where the religion I had practiced all my life, a religion of love, community, and hope, was preaching hate? I was deeply, deeply hurt by this. I felt almost as if I was in an abusive relationship. I longed to attend Mass, to be a part of the Catholic community, but I felt spurned, shut out, and unloved.

I tried to continue to go to Mass, but it was too painful. I no longer felt anything within the walls of the Catholic Church, and this emptiness, this lack of feeling, was the most heartbreaking of all. In years prior, I had literally felt the arms of God surround me while in this Church and now I felt nothing. I imagined my heart covered in cement, with the read-

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ings and the singing and the fellowship unable to break through. These absences became more real than the presences. I was unable to connect in the way I used to, and as a result, my relationship with the Catholic Church became mean-spirited and spiteful. I started going to Communion not out of a desire to practice my faith in this way, but as an act of rebellion: no one is going to tell me that I can't. I put my arm around Marena during Mass, despite any odd stares or shifting in seats, because I wanted to show that I could. I could no longer sing the hymns—to sing “*All Are Welcome*” felt like a slap in the face. I visited other churches, but they didn't feel right either. I've never stopped longing for the Mass that I once knew.

I wish I could say that upon finding Dignity, my sense of Catholic identity was restored, that I felt healed and normal and back in the arms of God. But that isn't the case for me, at least not yet. Just as I questioned when I first came out whether I could label myself as a lesbian, I question now whether I can label myself as a Catholic. I don't celebrate the feast days, I don't go to Mass, I don't share many of the beliefs espoused by the hierarchy of the Church. How can I say I am a Catholic after all of that? What does it even *mean* to be Catholic? The first time I attended a Dignity Mass I wept through the whole thing. I couldn't stay in the room. This is how deep my wounds go. That I cannot even attend a loving, welcoming Catholic Mass without weeping for the deep sadness that I experience surrounding my Catholicism, without mourning the loss of that twenty-two year relationship. I still question where I belong, in what faith community, in what church. And as I see the ways in which countless people are hurt, killed, and shamed all “in the name of God” by organized religion, I have begun to question organized religion in general.

A wise author, whom I cannot now remember by name, once wrote that after her husband died she held onto her grief and her pain, because after grief and pain come acceptance, but *in* the grief and pain there is still hope. As if by grieving for her husband, she was able to still hold onto a piece of him. I think this is why I still grieve my old relationship with Catholicism, why I have not yet been able to

form a “new” Catholic identity, and why I have not cut ties with Catholicism entirely. In grieving, there is hope. Hope that the Catholic Church will accept me as I am, that the old feeling I had will return, that I wasn't duped all those years by the men in the pulpit. By grieving, I am able to hold onto the memories of being Catholic before I came out, the memories from my family and from my college. I don't have to accept that it won't ever be quite like that again.

I am not sure where my faith journey will lead me next. I feel content in my work with DignityUSA, knowing in my heart that it IS possible to be a Catholic and a lesbian (even if I haven't figured it out yet), and knowing that without the work of Dignity countless GLBT Catholics (and straight Catholics for that matter) would not know this truth. And although I don't label myself as a Catholic the way I used to, I still have an endearing fondness, a particular affection, for the denomination of my youth, and as such am still here on the Catholic sidelines, a bit war-weary, but still in the fight. In grief there is hope, in struggle there is hope, in God there is hope.



My loving parents, who started me on my Catholic journey and are with me every step of the way

Have a story to share?  
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**A Christmas Prayer**  
Robert Louis Stevenson

Loving God, Help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.



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Donate on-line at <http://www.DignityUSA.org>, or send your tax-deductible contribution to DignityUSA, PO Box 376, Medford, MA 02155

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