



Dateline

Monthly News Bulletin
Volume 17, No. 1
January 2008

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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Happy Anniversary & Congratulations to:

Palm Springs (CA) - 3 years
Brooklyn (NY) - 31 years
*** Phoenix (AZ) - 31 years**

*** A Dignity-Integrity Chapter**

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Executive Committee Reflections and Resolutions

By Lewis Tanner, National Secretary

As a New Year begins, it is time to reflect on the previous year and create resolutions for the New Year.

In 2007, DignityUSA:

- Transitioned into a new executive team with Mark Matson, President; Lourdes Rodriguez-Nogues, Vice-President; Lewis Tanner, Secretary, and Chris Lawrence, Treasurer.
- Had a successful 18th Biennial Convention in Austin, TX.
- Launched pre-registration for our 2009 San Francisco 40th Anniversary Convention amidst much excitement.
- Successfully raised funding for the first year salary, benefits and travel for an executive director, as well as partial funding for the second and third years for the position.
- Hired Peggy Burns as our operations manager and Marianne Duddy-Burke as our executive director.

In 2008, DignityUSA will be busy!

- The 2009 convention committee will continue lining up the program and speakers.
- The 2011 convention committee will continue its work for our gathering in Washington, DC.
- The 2013 convention host city proposal submission begins!
- The Pope visits the United States. DignityUSA will continue to speak out!
- Other committees busy at work include the marketing, fundraising, finance, human resources, communications, nominations and elections committees.
- Quarterly conference call with chapter presidents and Mark Matson. Chapter leaders should send contact information to secretary@dignityusa.org.

Each year, we look for DignityUSA members willing to be candidates for the Board of Directors. Look for further details in the February Dateline and on our website.

Beginning with its spring meeting, the national board will meet in different cities. This will help offset extensive travel costs for board members on the West Coast always flying to the East Coast. More important, the diversity in meeting sites will allow more DignityUSA members to see the board in action.

- January 12, 2008, the board meets by teleconference.
- April 4-6, 2008, the board will meet in Boston.
- July 2008, the board plans to meet in Denver.
- Look in future Datelines for more meeting details.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I wish you a prosperous and delightful New Year!

DignityUSA Board of Directors**Executive Committee**

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Archbishop's remarks prompt Vigil of Solidarity response

In his column for the November 15, 2007, issue of *TheCatholicSpirit.com*—an official publication of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis (MN), Archbishop John C. Nienstedt sets forth four points on the church's teaching about homosexuality.

Referring to the document issued by the U.S. Catholic bishops assembly, June 14-19, 2004, in Denver, clarifying the role of Catholic politicians with respect to their stands on moral issues within the public area, Archbishop Nienstedt claims it "...was our collective resolve that Catholic churches, colleges and other institutions should not give 'awards, honors or platforms' to persons who, whether Catholic or not, held public positions contrary to the church's defined teaching. To do so would cause scandal, leading Catholics to be confused about what is right and wrong according to the teachings of the church, prompting them to endorse or even to commit immoral behavior."

He goes on to say, "This is why it was not appropriate for Carol Curoe and her father to speak at the Church of St. Francis Cabrini in Minneapolis.

(Note: A Catholic lesbian and supportive father invited to tell their story by parish.)

"Those who actively encourage or promote homosexual acts or such activity within a homosexual lifestyle formally cooperate in a grave evil and, if they do so knowingly and willingly, are guilty of mortal sin. They have broken communion with the church and are prohibited from receiving holy Communion until they have had a conversion of heart, expressed sorrow for their action and received sacramental absolution from a priest."

Archbishop Nienstedt distances himself from the USCCB statement *Always Our Children* claiming it is not a normative teaching statement of the bishops' conference, however, the 2006 statement *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* is normative.

Citing his establishment of chapters of Courage and Encourage 11 years ago in the Archdiocese of Detroit, he holds them forth as accepted support groups similar to those of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Vigil of Solidarity

On Sunday afternoon, December 2, 2007, over 300 people gathered at the Cathedral of St. Paul in Minneapolis (MN) for an hour vigil of solidarity with LGBT Catholics, their families and friends in response and protest to the remarks of Archbishop Nienstedt. Words of hope and encouragement came from speakers such as Brian McNeill, president of Dignity/Twin Cities; Mary Lynn and Mike Murphy, Confounders of Catholic Rainbow Parents, and Michael Bayley, Coordinator of the Catholic Pastoral Minorities and editor of the *Progressive Catholic Voice*. Mel White, founder of Soulforce, reminded those gathered that "throughout history of the Catholic Church, the Christian Church has been saved by people like you who loved it enough to stand up and say, 'You're wrong'"

Hundreds support gay, lesbian Catholics at vigil

By Kris Berggren, St. Paul, Minnesota

National Catholic Reporter, December 14, 2007.

Reprinted with permission.

At least 300 Catholics and supporters braved cold temperatures and gusty winds to gather outside the Cathedral of St. Paul Dec. 2, in a vigil of solidarity with gay and lesbian Catholics and their families.

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May
You and
Yours
Be
Blessed
Abundantly
In the
New
Year

With respect to culpability in matters of faith and morals, each person is called to follow his or her informed conscience which is in an evolving rather than static state of development.

*Archbishop's remarks prompt Vigil of Solidarity response
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The event included a “die-in” on cathedral steps and brief remarks by speakers including Mary Lynn Murphy, president of Catholic Rainbow Parents, and Mel White of SoulForce, a nonprofit activist organization that confronts homophobia by addressing religious bigotry.

White told the group they were the latest in a long line of dissenters such as Galileo and Franz Jägerstätter, “who loved the church enough to stand up and say, ‘You’re wrong.’ ”

The group also delivered an open letter to Coadjutor Archbishop John Nienstedt, who is to succeed Archbishop Harry Flynn as head of the archdiocese in the spring. The letter responded to Nienstedt’s Nov. 15 column in the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Spirit*. Nienstedt had written that people who support homosexual activity, such as parents who support their adult children’s gay or lesbian partnerships or family relationships, may be considered to “formally cooperate in a grave evil” or be “guilty of mortal sin.” He also distanced himself from the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter to parents of gay children, “Always Our Children.” Nienstedt said that document “is not a normative teaching statement of the bishops’ conference.”

The open letter characterizes Nienstedt’s column as hurtful and unacceptable and derived from flawed research on human sexuality.

Michael Bayly of the Progressive Catholic Voice, a grass-roots group that organized the event, said they hoped to “show there are Catholics who disagree not only with what Nienstedt has said but how he arrived at his teachings. We want a voice in the formulation of church teachings especially with regard to human sexuality. In Catholic tradition, the laity should have a role in developing teachings.”

Mary Turbak, a parishioner at St. Pascal Baylon, said she doesn’t have a gay or lesbian child but she was there to support friends. “We’re here because we’re against what Nienstedt said, that you’re living in sin if you’re supporting your children. Isn’t it the people in the church that matter, or is it a bunch of rules?”

Editor’s Comment: With respect to culpability in matters of faith and morals, each person is called to follow his or her informed conscience which is in an evolving rather than static state of development. We are called to validate truth—as we know and understand it—via new and evolving evidence from many sources, including scientific discovery and respected authors on church teaching, faith and morality, as well as lived experience.

With respect to mortal sin, here are excerpts taken from the Catholic Catechism.

1857 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”

1858 Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother.” The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.

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*Archbishop's remarks prompt Vigil of Solidarity response
Continued from page 3*

We are called to validate truth—as we know and understand it—via new and evolving evidence from many sources, including scientific discovery and respected authors on church teaching, faith and morality, as well as lived experience.

1859 Mortal sin requires full knowledge and complete consent. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law. It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.

1860 Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.

1861 Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.

Civil unions struggling for equal treatment Despite N.J. law, companies failing to extend marriage benefits to same-sex couples.

By JARED KALTWASSER
STAFF WRITER

Courier News Online , Thursday, December 20, 2007

www.couriernews@c-n.com

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...on Sep 29 2007, their 17th anniversary, Polnasek and Kellison exchanged vows again...at their civil union ceremony.

...even though the State of New Jersey now considers their union the equivalent of marriage, it didn't take long for them to find out that a civil union license isn't necessarily a ticket to equality.

DUNELLEN [NJ]—Kenny Polnasek and Michael Kellison exchanged vows in a private ceremony 17 years ago, and since that time they've always considered themselves to be married, even though the state they lived in didn't consider that designation – "marriage" – to be legally valid.

But in October 2006, the state Supreme Court ordered the state Legislature to grant homosexual couples the same rights it extends to heterosexual married couples. The resulting legislation, a bill creating civil unions, took effect in February [2007]

"I'm a Jersey boy, born and raised, and when it (civil unions) came here I was like, 'Yeah, let's do it,'" said Polnasek, who said he had been holding out for gay marriage up until that time.

So on Sept. 29, [2007], their 17th anniversary, Polnasek and Kellison exchanged vows again, this time at their civil union ceremony.

But even though the state now considers their union the equivalent of marriage, it didn't take long for Polnasek and Kellison to find out that a civil union license isn't necessarily a ticket to equality.

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Dignity/Dayton conducts on-going workshops on Non-Violence

The Living Beatitudes Community, a ministry of Dignity/Dayton, sponsored a “Taste of Non-Violent Communication (NVC) workshop” on December 2, 2007. Living Beatitudes invited members of Christ Episcopal Church—where the chapter meets for its liturgies—to join them.

Compassionate Communication is a language that serves life. It is a language used when our intention is to connect with others so that everyone’s needs can be joyfully met.

NVC provides us a way to resolve conflict peacefully and humanely, hear difficult messages without taking them personally, connect with and express what is alive in ourselves and others, communicate in ways that are in alignment with our needs and values, express clear requests and explore life serving strategies for meeting everyone’s needs, and inspire giving from the heart.

NVC is a process language that evokes the natural human joy of giving within us and others. With its specific approach to speaking and listening, NVC facilitates the flow of natural compassion between people.

By focusing on four areas—observation, feelings, needs and requests—we are able to express ourselves and hear others while maintaining respectful and empathetic connections.

The Living Beatitudes Community followed up the workshop with sessions on December 9 and 16 and has plans to learn more about it as a program during Lent.

For more information, please contact Dick Young:
alwaysyoung7@yahoo.com

Civil unions struggling for equal treatment
Continued from page 4

A change in status

The problems started when Polnasek, now retired after 33 years as a program analyst for Johnson & Johnson, most recently at its Skillman offices, tried to update his retirement benefits profile to reflect his change in status.

“About a month after our civil union, I went into the system, the Johnson & Johnson benefits system, and the very first place it takes you to is your status page,” Polnasek said.

Until that time, Polnasek had been listed as single. He scrolled through the status list to find his options were “married” or “domestic partnership.” Polnasek and Kellison don’t have a domestic partnership—a weaker precursor to civil unions—so Polnasek clicked “married”.

“The first thing it told me was ‘Congratulations on your marriage,’ and then ‘What is the gender of your spouse?’,” he said.

When Polnasek clicked “male,” the program informed him that the company does not recognize civil unions. A phone call confirmed that stance, forcing Polnasek to list his relationship to his beneficiary, Kellison, as “other.”

“It kind of hurt,” he said. “I’m not single, and he’s not my ‘other.’”

Kellison had a similar experience at Somerset Medical Center, where he has worked as an X-ray technologist for nearly eight years.

Though Polnasek has medical coverage through Johnson & Johnson, the couple wanted him to be on Kellison’s plan, because they said it would cost less and provide better coverage.

When the company’s open insurance enrollment period began, Kellison started filling out the paperwork to add Polnasek to his coverage.

“It didn’t have a place for partners or civil unions, so I checked off ‘spouse’ and wrote Kenny’s name,” Kellison said.

When he went to turn the form in, he was told, “I think they’re going to have to talk to you. We’re a privately insured institution, so we don’t have to offer benefits to civil union partners,” Kellison recalled.

That kind of response was not what Kellison and Polnasek expected when they signed up for their civil union.

“The problem is that nobody seems to have the perception that this is a law we need to obey,” Kellison said. “They make it like a separate-but-equal status, and I think that’s half the problem.”

A list of complaints

Kellison and Polnasek are not alone.

Steven Goldstein, chairman of the Montclair-based gay rights group Garden State Equality, said 414 couples with civil unions have contacted his office with complaints about their employers or other institutions failing to recognize their civil unions.

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FUNDRAISING NEWS

Dignity/Columbus Raises \$1,000 for DignityUSA

Mark Matson, DignityUSA's President and member of Dignity/Columbus, writes: "I am pleased to report that the Columbus, Ohio chapter raised a little over \$1,000 at its December 1st fundraiser, which was a traveling dinner. Five households hosted a course. We had 20 people pay \$50 each for a reservation. It was a fun social evening, as well. We might have acquired a couple more members as a result. Along with our garage sale in November, the chapter raised over \$1,500 for DignityUSA in the past two months!"

Raise money for Dignity-USA just by searching the Internet!



Members can raise money for DignityUSA by using **GoodSearch** to search the internet and **GoodShop** to make online purchases!

GoodSearch.com is the search engine with a unique social mission. It's powered by Yahoo!, so you get the same great search results, but each time you do a search, GoodSearch makes a donation to your cause! The organization donates 50% of advertising revenue to the nonprofits and schools selected by their users.

GoodSearch.com is the new online marketplace that donates a percentage of your online purchase to the charity or school of your choice. You can choose from hundreds of popular online merchants and the experience of shopping through **GoodShop** is the same as going to the retailer directly.

Civil unions struggling for equal treatment *Continued from page 5*

As of Dec. 7, [2007], 2,181 New Jersey couples have received civil unions, according to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.

"The civil union law is a disaster that needs to be thrown out and replaced," Goldstein said.

Much of the problem stems from a disconnect between state and federal law.

Companies that contract out for employee benefits are subject to state law, but companies large enough to be self-insured are governed by federal law, Goldstein said.

And while New Jersey law now dictates that civil unions are equal to marriage, federal law defines marriage as strictly the union of a man and a woman, said Denise Keyser, a partner in the labor and employment group at the law firm of Ballard, Spahr, Andrews and Ingersoll LLP in Voorhees.

"Back when the Republicans controlled Congress and Bill Clinton was president, they passed and he signed the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA," she said. "And that makes it clear for federal law purposes that marriage can only be a marriage between a man and a woman."

For example, she said, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act doesn't apply to same-sex couples, even if they have a civil union, though the state's family leave act would.

But David Buckel, senior counsel at Lambda Legal, a New York law firm that fights for equal treatment of gays, says employers who draw a line between straight and gay employees are discriminating.

"If they're self-insured, they're so big they can make their own health insurance. Their argument is that they can make their own rules," Buckel said.

"They tend to say their hands are tied because of federal law, and that's just dead wrong," Buckel said. "Even if their argument is right, they can elect to do otherwise."

Goldstein believes that if New Jersey enacted a gay marriage law, self-insured companies wouldn't try to hide behind the federal law that governs employee benefits, known as the Employee Retirement and Income Security Act, or ERISA.

"Massachusetts is also governed by ERISA, and in Massachusetts gay couples can actually marry, that's the one state," he said. "Employers in Massachusetts are choosing not to invoke ERISA. ERISA is hardly a problem in Massachusetts."

But Keyser isn't so sure that would change anything.

"That would not change the issue, because the issue is that federal law defines marriage to be a union between a man and a woman, and so it doesn't matter what New Jersey defines marriage to be," she said.

Policy change

As the debate goes on, private companies continue to establish their own policies—and change them.

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COUPLES MINISTRY

A Call for Couples to Register with DignityUSA

Are you celebrating an anniversary with your life partner, or have you just made a commitment? If so, we would like to recognize you!

Respecting your right to privacy, we will not do this in a public way.

Two DignityUSA members have been maintaining our Couples Registry and sending cards of congratulations to couples for a number of years. They desire to continue with this much-appreciated ministry. Since they do not have a computer to facilitate sending or receiving updates, they have to rely on “snail mail.”

Rita Wagner, DignityUSA Board Member, serves as liaison to the Couples Ministry

If you wish to participate in this ministry, please send your names, the date of your commitment, a copy of your commitment document (if applicable), and your address to Rita at rita.a.wagner@gmail.com. All of this information, as well as updated details, will be appropriately forwarded.

Copies of applicable documents can be scanned or converted to image files—such as JPEG or GIF—at local Kinko’s or other copy centers for transmittal as attachments to your e-mail messages.

Civil unions struggling for equal treatment *Continued from page 6*

Last week, Kellison’s employer, Somerset Medical Center, announced it will change its policy on employee benefits. Starting Jan. 1, [2008], the hospital will extend benefits to the civil union partners of its employees.

“Somerset Medical Center is self-insured, therefore we are not legally required to extend health-care coverage that is self-insured to any of our employees,” said Vicky Allen, assistant vice president for marketing and public relations at the hospital in an e-mail. “However, as a health-care provider, we feel that it is the right thing to do for all of our employees and will extend their benefits beyond our legal requirement to do so.”

The hospital said that because it had recently underwent a change in its health-care insurance carrier, it was planning to start providing benefits to civil union partners in 2009.

“However, several employees had already expressed an interest in having civil union benefits for 2008,” Allen said. “We began investigating our options with the new insurance carrier and did some benchmarking with other hospitals. We concluded that offering civil union benefits for 2008 was the right thing to do for our employees and for the medical center.”

As for Johnson & Johnson, spokesman Bill Price said the company does not recognize civil unions, meaning it does not provide medical benefits to civil union partners. But he said that doesn’t affect pension benefits, because a retiree can name anyone as his or her beneficiary, even if they must list that beneficiary as an “other”.

“So whether it’s civil union, domestic partner, or other, he’s eligible to name anyone,” Price said.

Price said he could not say whether the company would start allowing retirees to list their partners as civil union partners.

“Certainly, we continually look at whether there are needs to update our programs and classifications,” he said.

In November [2007], Polnasek and Kellison filed a formal complaint against Johnson & Johnson with the state Attorney General’s Office. Lee Moore, a spokesman for the office, said he could not comment on the specific case because it is still under investigation. But he said four such complaints—alleging discrimination based on civil union status involving employee benefits or pension plans—have been filed with his office.

“Typically, if there is a finding of probable cause, eventually in any case there is an effort made to mediate some sort of resolution without a full-blown hearing,” Moore said.

If mediation fails, Moore said, the cases are generally referred to an administrative law judge.

Keyser, who represents large and small companies in New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania, said the enactment of the civil union law has not affected her practice much. She said the civil union law is a success from a business standpoint in that it does what it set out to do—force entities subject to state law to recognize civil unions as equal to marriages.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

Bishop Frank Murphy Scholarship For Women in Ministry

**\$1,000 Awards for the 2008-
2009 Academic Year**

For women who are:

- Members of the Women's Ordination Conference†
- Enrolled or accepted in a graduate program of theological study
- Willing to promote WOC goals and programs at their institution

Candidates must submit:

- Letter of recommendation from a mentor testifying to the candidate's commitment to WOC goals
- Personal statement describing how her future ministry will uphold the mission of WOC
- Resume or Curriculum Vita
- Proof of enrollment

Scholarship funds must be applied towards educational expenses.

Recipients are also required to submit a follow-up report explaining how the award impacted her growth.

Application materials must be post-marked by **January 30, 2008**.

Scholarship winners will be announced in **June 2008**.

Please address all inquiries and applications to:

Scholarship Committee
Women's Ordination Conference
P.O. Box 2693

Fairfax, VA 22031-0693
(703) 352-1006

nvazquez@womensordination.org

www.womensordination.org

† Application for WOC membership can be included with scholarship materials.

For more information, visit
www.womensordination.org

*Civil unions struggling for equal treatment
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But Buckel said nixing the idea of separate institutions for heterosexual and homosexual couples is the only way for the state to truly grant equality.

"I think its just plain bias that it comes down to, and the problem in New Jersey is that when the government itself creates a separate legal status to a minority group, it's sending a message—if someone's biased, it's sending a message that its okay."

But while the government, the business community and society struggle to find a term for their relationship, and to decide what the legal implications of that term are, Kellison and Polnasek say that in their minds, the issue is cut and dry.

"We've been calling ourselves married for the last 17 years," Kellison said. "What's in a name isn't that important to us. It makes all the difference to corporations. To us, it's an equivalency thing. We want the government to say to us there are equal terms for all."

- Jared Kaltwasser can be reached at (908) 707-3137 or jkaltwasse@gannett.com.

Editor's Note: Kenny Polnasek and Michael Kellison are members of Dignity/New Brunswick (NJ).

Dignity/Boston celebrates 35 years

Editor's Note: Dignity/Boston celebrated its 35th anniversary on December 2, 2007. Bay Windows, New England's largest GLBT Newspaper, ran a story in its December 5, 2007, edition highlighting the chapter's history and the personal experience of several members. The article does an excellent job in communicating the role the chapter plays in the life of its members and the local community, as well as how its leaders have kept it on a course of continuity and mission. The complete article follows.

'If you are hungry, we will feed you'

by Laura Kiritsy

Associate Editor, Bay Windows

Wednesday Dec 5, 2007

Reprinted with permission.

Thirty-two years ago, Diane Sidorowicz was a young woman searching for signs of lesbian life beyond the local bar scene. With few resources for gay people available in 1975, she devoured the pages of Gay Community News, a Boston-based weekly. "I used to read it all cover to cover because it was the only information I had," said Sidorowicz, a lifelong resident of Dorchester. It was on those pages that she spotted an advertisement for a Catholic liturgy for gay people at St. Clement's Church. Her first thought was, "No way."

She soon made her way to the Boylston St. church one Sunday night, only to find a darkened, empty sanctuary. "I thought, okay, somebody put a joke in the paper," Sidorowicz recalled. A man approached her to offer assistance. "I said, "I'm looking for the 5:30 liturgy." He directed her to the church basement. As Sidorowicz headed down a winding stone staircase she was struck by the sounds of men laughing. It didn't sound like the Catholic Church she knew. She took a seat on a folding chair, among a group that included just two other women. "And it was an incredible service. I mean, I was so moved," said Sidorowicz. "I think I was stunned." Even more stunning, she was

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Dignity/Boston celebrates 35 years
Continued from page 8

invited to stay for a social hour after the Mass, a largely non-existent practice in the Catholic Church. “So they were a very welcoming community from the very first day. And when I went back the following week people knew my name. I was like, ‘You remember me?’”

Sidorowicz had found Dignity/Boston, an organization that has provided a spiritual home for LGBT Catholics since 1972. She’s never left.

Sidorowicz was among about 50 Dignity/Boston members that gathered to celebrate the organization’s 35th anniversary at its weekly Mass at The Church of St. John the Evangelist on Bowdoin St. on Dec. 2.

That Dignity/Boston now congregates in an Episcopal parish—as opposed to St. Clement’s, which is Catholic—is a testament to its enduring vitality in the face of hostility from the institutional Catholic Church, which has only increased since the inception of Dignity/Boston and its parent organization DignityUSA. Under the tenure of Boston Archbishop Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, the group was ousted from St. Clement’s in 1977, at which point it moved to Arlington Street Church, a Unitarian Universalist Church. In 1979, Medeiros banned Archdiocesan priests from presiding over Dignity/Boston services. Services are now led by lay people or by priests operating outside of Archdiocesan authority. In 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—now Pope Benedict XVI—ordered bishops to “to deny use of Church property to organizations that do not accept strictures against homosexual relationships,” effectively banishing all Dignity chapters from meeting on Church properties.

But rather than bemoan being pushed to the margins of mainstream Catholicism, Dignity/Boston members have embraced it. “I think you can never deny the pain that the bishops and the pope and the institutional Church have inflicted on gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered people and on our families as well,” said Marianne Duddy, a Dignity/Boston member of 25 years who is also a former president of the national organization. “But I think we and lots of other people in the Catholic Church are also finding tremendous freedom. I mean, we’re not the only intentional, small faith community around Boston, we’re not the only group that has lay women and men co-leading the services, we’re not the only group that has a theology of inclusion anymore, and we’re starting to connect with those groups, which is really exciting.” Duddy points to groups like the [Corps] of [Reserved] Priests United for Service (CORPUS), a national organization of former priests who advocate for allowing priests to marry, and Massachusetts Women-Church, a group that advocates for women’s ordination that was banned from using Church buildings by former Boston Archbishop Cardinal Bernard Law. While many people largely think of the Catholic Church in terms of the traditional parish model, Duddy said, “the reality is there’s lots of versions of being Catholic out there and it’s kind of exciting to see how many of them look sort of what Dignity’s looked like for 35

years. And they may be 10 years old, they may be five years old, they may be just emerging ... and people are still claiming that Catholic tradition in spite of what the bishops have to say about it.”

And though the institutional Catholic Church hasn’t changed for the better on the issue of homosexuality in 35 years, LGBT culture certainly has changed since the days when Sidorowicz combed *Gay Community News* in search of social alternatives to the bar scene. And while many LGBT groups have come and gone over the years, and other Christian denominations have opened their doors to LGBT people, Duddy is encouraged that Dignity/Boston has maintained its relevance. “There are still people coming through the door and especially in the last few years we’ve had this great influx of younger people, and they bring an entirely different sense of what the Church is about and what being gay or lesbian is about or what being transgendered or bisexual is about and there’s much more energy in that population,” she explained. “It’s not so much about fighting against [the institutional Church], it’s about how to move forward positively, and I think that’s really helping all of us to not put so much energy into resisting the institutional Church but to create our own theology.” Dignity/Boston members have created wedding rituals and theology around how Catholics can support civil rights, including marriage rights, for same-sex couples. On top of that, Duddy points out, they’ve run a community without an assigned priest for 35 years, proving that, “lay people can take charge of the Catholic Church, and I think those are really exciting messages for our community and for the whole Catholic Church right now.”

Indeed, the organization has provided a sense of empowerment for many worshippers. Joe Gatto of Randolph, who was among three men recognized at the anniversary celebration for having been with the group for all of its 35 years, explains Dignity/Boston’s appeal this way: “Nobody was left out. A lot of time churches say, if you’re not Catholic don’t come to communion. Here, whatever your spirituality is you’re welcome. And I look at it as, if you are hungry we will feed you. In the institutional Church, if you’re hungry we won’t feed you.” Gatto goes on to point out a literal angle to the nourishment which Dignity/Boston provides: For 22 years, the organization, in partnership with Arlington Street Church, has operated the Friday Night Supper Program, which provides meals for 200 people in need each week. “We’ve never missed a day,” Gatto boasts. And though the institutional Church has not exactly nourished LGBT Catholics, Gatto has learned to adapt, with the help of Dignity/Boston. “Years ago, if the pope said, ‘Jump off the bridge,’ I would gladly jump off,” said Gatto. “Now if he says it, [I say,] ‘Are you coming with me?’”

Standing beside Gatto in the St. John’s basement after Duddy offered an anniversary toast, George Mercier of Worcester, another 35-year Dignity/Boston member, interjected a more pointed rejoinder to the pope’s hypothetical bridge-jumping decree: “You go first.”

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Mercier said he first discovered Dignity/Boston as a young man recently discharged from the U.S. Air Force who was “trying to find myself spiritually.” Though he had been attending Mass at the Paulist Center, a Park Street chapel that has long been a refuge for marginalized Catholics, Mercier said there was something missing, though he can’t put his finger on what it was. When he got wind that there was a group of gay folks meeting at St. Clement’s, he decided to investigate. “And I’ve never left,” he said. “There was a sense of community right from the beginning and it wasn’t because we were gay,” said Mercier. “There was just a sense of community.”

Rene Sontag, who also celebrated his 35th anniversary of Dignity, sounds a similar note. “It’s become my faith community and my family,” said the South Shore man, “which is why I’m still here.”

And though the institutional Church refuses to recognize Dignity/Boston, Duddy, who emerged as an articulate counterpoint to the institutional Church and its conservative allies, who vilified gay people and gay priests in the aftermath of the priestly sexual abuse scandal, indicates the congregation will likely be around for another 35 years at the very least. An inquiry about how often in the last 25 years she’s been asked some variation of the question, “How can you be gay and Catholic?” draws a hearty, knowing laugh. “Yeah, that’s the number one question,” says Duddy. “For me it’s like, they’re just not going to push me out. I’m just way too stubborn for that to happen,” she says, laughing again. “Yup, that’s the big question.” Surveying the crowd that gathered for the post-liturgical anniversary celebration, she adds, “This is how it’s done.”

Sidorowicz would agree. Had she not found Dignity/Boston she “would have been lost,” she said. “I would have been in some little parish church just going there really not liking it and going home and feeling empty. I never feel empty when I leave here.”

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