

dignity/usa newsletter

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WASHINGTON, DC 20005

FOR THE GAY AND LESBIAN CATHOLIC MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

VOI. 21/NO.4

SUMMER, 1989

DIGNITY: The Early Years

RECOLLECTIONS BY JOSEPH GILGAMESH KILLIAN

Founder of DIGNITY/National and First Elected President

After less than a year, Father Pat saw that DIGNITY was moving into new areas of concern and suggested that a committee be formed to discuss other directions. He asked Robert Fournier Pelletier to act as the chair and I was asked to be treasurer and handle membership and correspondence. In September, 1970, we began holding monthly meetings and liturgies in the Hall of Saint Brendan's Church - our first meeting on Church property.

A landmark article called "The Christian Homosexual" by Father John McNeill, SJ appeared in a clergy magazine and was later published in our monthly newsletter. This article marked the beginning of a new theological discussion group on homosexuality and showed the Holy Spirit was indeed working among others.

At this point, I saw a need for outreach to more people. Bob Fournier received a positive response to a letter he wrote to Newman Center chaplains, thus we decided to write to all the local pastors. Naively, we decided to inform newly appointed Archbishop Timothy Manning before we acted.

February 11, 1971, Father Pat and his superior (who supported the organization) met with Archbishop Manning who said that Father Pat did not have permission to work in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Since Father Pat had wanted to start a group and then move on, he now had his chance, but the rest of us were in despair. A pot luck was scheduled for our meeting that month and as a trustee of ONE, Inc. (a gay education group), I arranged for us to move to its auditorium, Gloom turning to determination, however, after an inspiring talk by Bob Fournier. Manning's resistance had actually reinforced our determination to grow and put the group's leadership into the hands of the laity and beyond his control. At that meeting in February, 1971, DIGNITY reached a milestone.

The effort for further outreach continued. I wrote to Father McNeill, inviting him to be an honorary member and discussing with him the possibility of starting a chapter in New York City. (This did not occur until 1972).

With the election of Pope John XXIII,

the Holy Spirit inspired an Ecumenical Council that opened the windows of the Church to renewal. Moved by that Spirit, Father Patrick X. Nidorf, an Augustinian priest in San Diego was moved to begin a psychological counseling group for gay/lesbian Catholics struggling with guilt feelings over their sexual orientation. "It seemed obvious that the Church was not meeting the needs of the gay and lesbian community, since there always seemed to be excessive and unreal problems of guilt that was sometimes reinforced in the confessional instead of resolved," Father Pat recalled.

Father Pat's application form was long, filled with psychological questions and required the members be at least 21 years old. In 1969, ads in the Los Angeles Free Press and other papers led to monthly meetings. Initially, these alternated between San Diego and Los Angeles, but the two meetings were soon consolidated, with Father Pat driving up to Los Angeles each month. A newsletter provided words of encouragement and gave directions to where the next meeting would be held.

I also called Father Donald Maloney, SJ, chairman of religious studies at Loyola University, Los Angeles. He spoke at our April meeting, emphasizing that love - not sexual orientation - is the basis of Christian life. DIGNITY's educational program continued with such speakers as Dr. Evelyn Hooker, a UCLA research psychologist, and a panel representing a range of gay and lesbian groups. Bob took over the newsletter and developed it into a forum for our views. Advertising also continued, so by the end of 1971 we had nearly 200 members, nearly twice as many as we had at the beginning of the year.

I asked several people to head committees which enriched the DIGNITY community, and we participated as a group in the Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade held in June, gaining added visibility. Bob developed a Statement of Purpose for the Board to consider at a special meeting in June, I sent copies to all the priests and brother members and a revised version was adopted as DIGNITY's Declaration of Position and Purpose. With only minor changes

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