

Sexual Ethics: Experience, Growth, and Challenge

A Pastoral Reflection for Lesbian and Gay Catholics



Introductory Comments

On the weekend of May 17-19, 1985, ten members of Dignity met together in San Francisco to begin the process of fulfilling the mandate of a motion passed by the House of Delegates in Seattle in 1983. That mandate was "in partial recognition of Dignity's twentieth anniversary, to present a document to the Executive House of Delegates for approval at that body's meeting on the occasion of the 1989 National Convention."

Out of that first meeting, the Task Force on Sexual Ethics issued the following message to the entire Dignity membership:

"As members of your Task Force on Sexual Ethics, our first act is to address ourselves to the prayer, reflection, and study that are essential to success. With the guidance and support of Jesus' Spirit, we can discern together and dedicate ourselves to an expression of our sexuality 'in a manner that is consonant with Christ's teaching.' We commit ourselves to listening to you and to your experience."

Over the next four and a half years the Task Force met eight times, visiting the cities of New York, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Chicago, Miami, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati. An initial draft of the document was presented to the Dignity membership in Miami in July, 1987, and a final edition was completed in March, 1989, under the careful scrutiny of a professional editor.

The Task Force is grateful and proud to pass on to you its final report — "**Sexual Ethics — Experience, Growth, Challenge.**" The House of Delegates voted in 1989 to "fully accept and endorse the document...."

It should be noted and emphasized that in reality what the Dignity membership has thereby accepted and endorsed is nothing other than its own lived experience. It was at the Vancouver meeting in February, 1986, that the Task Force determined to take a decisively non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical approach to dealing with the subject of sexual ethics. The operative principle here was that the Church must be instructed by the lived experience of its people. The Task Force also decided, however, not to see the hierarchy as the primary audience of the document.

Instead, the document was defined as communication from the people of God to the people of God. As such, the document was seen as filling a pastoral role, and was therefore intended to be a source of "conscience formation and spiritual growth." It was to that end that the Task Force set itself to the task of listening to the Dignity membership via the two survey sources which it had developed. The end result, we believe, is a document on sexual ethics which reflects what you, the Dignity membership, have experienced in the ongoing task of finding expressions of sexuality which are, as the Dignity [Statement of Position and Purpose](#) says "consonant with Christ's teaching."

Let it not be said, however, that the process is finished. Your Task Force on Sexual Ethics wants to say most emphatically that if we have learned nothing else over these past years, we certainly have come to know the immensity of this task not only for the Dignity organization as a whole, but also for each of us individually. The work of the Task Force has just been a beginning. "Sexual Ethics Experience, Growth, Challenge" is just a beginning. The Experience goes on, the Growth continues, and the Challenge is always before us as we strive to become always more Christ like in all our actions, including those that are a part of our sexual conduct. So let the discussions continue, let the ideas, thoughts, and insights be put into writing.

—Nate Gruel, Chair, Dignity Task Force on Sexual Ethics

Dignity Task Force on Sexual Ethics, 1989

We are Dignity: gay and lesbian Catholics families, and friends. We speak in a pastoral spirit, to provide a caring and compassionate service that will meet needs according to Christ's will especially the needs of lesbian and gay Catholics. We speak in conversation with all the faithful and to strengthen the bonds of communion with the whole church.

We speak publicly because of our responsibility for one another and to the Church. Responsibility to the reign of God requires us to speak of what God is doing in our lives and in the world. All of us, not just Church officials, are the Church being formed by God. Not to include the contributions of all the People of God impoverishes the Church and hinders the coming of God's reign.

We believe that we have a particular perspective on human sexuality and relationships which, as it unfolds, enriches the world and, in its own way, anticipates the reign of God. Stating and sharing our faith and experience as gay and lesbian Christians will enrich us and the wider Church and allow the Good News of Jesus Christ to be heard more clearly in the lesbian and gay community.

We meet the special challenge to be sexual persons and disciples of Jesus, and we stand firm in the conviction that we can live responsibly as gay and lesbian Christians and grow in likeness to Christ. We have felt this challenge more deeply than many of our brothers and sisters because Church officials have not only condemned the genital expression of our sexuality but have even regarded our sexuality as disordered. Despite our commitment to the Church, we are convinced that such condemnation is not the word of God. Our own experience is that we can express our sexuality in a manner consonant with Christ's teaching.

For years we have prayed and talked together about how we integrate our faith and our sexuality. We have tried to listen to what Christ says to lesbian and gay disciples. Though we cannot speak for all gays and lesbians in the Catholic tradition, we must speak of what we know (see Acts 4:1-20). The love of Christ requires it, for in the accents of lesbian and gay Catholics we hear the voice of Christ who continues God's work in our midst.

As detailed in the appendices, this document is based on surveys, interviews, discussions at the local, regional, and national level, and responses to a preliminary draft of this document. It is the living word of people who are journeying through life together as a lesbian and gay People of God.

In speaking of sexual ethics, we speak of the experience, the growth, and the challenge that we know. The first section of this document describes the experience of Catholic gays and lesbians associated with Dignity. The second section offers pastoral assistance to gays and lesbians in their growth as sexual Christians. The third section states the challenge and hope of the future.

That challenge we accept. We will continue to work to develop a common understanding of sexual ethics, to be Church in the lesbian and gay community, to integrate spirituality and sexuality, and to achieve the deeper communion that is the gift of the Spirit. As part of that work, this pastoral reflection on sexual ethics is a gift to ourselves, to our sisters and brothers in the lesbian and gay community, and to the wider Church. We offer it with the hope that it will stimulate thought, promote discussion, and support the growth of all who seek the full life that Jesus offers (see John 10:10).

Section One: The Experience of a Gay and Lesbian People of God

THE VOICE OF THE OPPRESSED

Invoking God's name, Church officials have forbidden us to live as God made us. They have told us to feel shame and guilt for who we are and what we do as sexual beings. They have commanded us not to speak of the truth that we know. The validity of our experience is denied — the most subtle and damaging form of oppression.

Our experience of oppression began as children when we were denied models to which we could look as we struggled to grow and mature sexually. Some of us were betrayed and abused when we sought guidance. More often, we were simply told that what made us different was disgusting and forbidden. The only hope we were offered was that we would grow out of what we felt, or that marriage would cure us, or that God would heal us if we prayed with faith, or that God's grace would enable us to endure life without sex and without intimacy.

Fear and internalized homophobia had their effect. Some of us tried to change. We used counseling, spiritual direction, heterosexual dating, and even marriage. Some of us tried to deny or repress our feelings. We acted as though we were not sexual and put up barriers to intimacy and affection. Some of us tried to live a double life. Some of us reached the point where life was unbearable. We sought relief in compulsive sex, or alcohol and drugs, or suicide.

Some of us overcame fear and came out to friends and family or a more public world. We were able to step outside the facade that was built as a defense but had become a prison. We were able to be honest with those who mattered to us. That was a liberating experience, even though it sometimes meant the loss of family, friends, employment, and Church.

Under the weight of prohibition, rejection, derision, and hate, many of us have felt estranged from God, Church, society, friends, family - even from ourselves. Our Church told us to comply or leave. Society warned us to hide our love and not flaunt our sexuality. Friends were distant. Family members were unable to understand. The need to deny feeling and affection left some among us less than whole, lacking in self-esteem, unable to trust.

Despite clear signs of progress, we still experience direct oppression within the Church. Groups that call attention to such oppression or seek the development of church teachings on sexuality are forbidden the use of church property. Some bishops oppose legislation protecting our civil rights. Even those Church officials who empathize with our struggle hardly dare to risk public gestures of fellowship and support.

THE STRENGTH OF THE POWERLESS

We are stronger, both as persons and as Christians, because we make hard moral decisions. That strength grows as we share the convictions and commitment that develop out of reflection on our experience as lesbian and gay People of God.

We have come to realize that being gay or lesbian is God's blessing and gift. All that God has created is good. All humans are created in God's own image and likeness.

Since humans were not made to be alone (see Genesis 2:18), as we seek and express intimacy and love we show God's image in action. We strive to make that image clearer by together acting justly, loving tenderly, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

In our struggle to recognize and affirm the rightness to exist as we were made, we discovered something that was distinctly ours: our ability to accept and to nurture the divine gift of selfhood. Self empowerment brings growth. We grow stronger in our commitment to live a Christian life. Our identification with Christ and with the Catholic tradition is the stronger because of the conscious decision and commitment to stay with our Church. We have the same faith, the same life of grace, and the same call to discipleship. The values we try to live by are values we have received through the Church. We are the persons and the believers that we are because we are the Church. Many of our brothers and sisters feel rejected by the Church and can no longer identify with the Church or with Christianity. We share their pain, anger, and disappointment. Still, we are convinced that God has been with us in our struggles and that it is God who strengthens us.

Not all who are leaders in the Church speak harshly. Some stand with us and proclaim the same good news that we learn from our experience. Today the Word of God speaks ever more clearly through preachers and prophets, theologians and teachers, proclaiming our dignity and rejecting the prejudice formerly sustained in the name of God. These disciples, like Jesus, suffer for speaking and living the truth. Their struggle for justice, like our own, gives birth to hope and new life.

SEXUAL DISCIPLES

Even though some Church officials have tried to exclude us, we exercise our responsibility to redeem the Church from its prejudices. As our models we have the gentile woman whose insistent faith led Jesus to look beyond the Chosen People (Matthew 15:21-28) and the Roman centurion whose quiet faith was recognized in the healing of his beloved boy (Matthew 8:5-13). The Gospel of Jesus, baptism, and the Eucharist are central influences in our lives. We align ourselves with the Catholic faith community and its broader teachings on justice, respect, compassion, and human dignity.

Dignity and communities like us are Church on a grass-roots level. These gatherings are the sacramental sign that we can be lesbian and gay and Catholic. Here we listen together to God's Word and make room for one another at Christ's Table. Here we minister to one another, proclaiming the good news: God's love for Jesus lives within us.

These communities also are places where we can support one another in the continuing struggle to integrate our sexuality and our spirituality. We do so by asking ourselves difficult questions and sharing honest answers.

We see our sexuality and its expression as the holy gift of God. The overwhelming majority of us are able to say that we are both sexually active and comfortable in our relationship with Christ. Being sexually active enables us to be more at ease with ourselves, more fulfilled in our relationships, more productive in our work and service. The Spirit is evident in a warmer and more peaceful prayer-life.

We acknowledge as well that sexual abstinence freely and positively chosen is good. Many of us, for various reasons, have attempted a lifestyle of sexual abstinence. Some have chosen sexual abstinence as a lifelong way of being sexual in the world, either as part of a formal religious commitment or as a way to pursue nonsexual interests more freely. Others have chosen to be sexually abstinent temporarily in order to pursue certain goals or to reassess or reestablish priorities.

However, when sexual abstinence has been imposed by an outside force life circumstances, institutional mandate, social pressures — the effect on our lives has generally been unhealthy, destructive, and alienating. The energy expended in maintaining an abstinent lifestyle left us too drained personally to enter into relationships with others or to grow spiritually. Abstinence attempted out of fear — fear of intimacy, fear of disease, fear of divine retribution — diminished our humanness, made us preoccupied with sex, left us hungering for the intimate love of another human being.

Like our heterosexual sisters and brothers, we have had to transcend centuries of teachings that not only separated spirituality and sexuality but also considered sexual expression, if not less than human, then at least a concession to human weakness. We have learned that the living Christian tradition has more to offer than prohibition and condemnation, that through the values and ideals of our faith communities we can create a positive and human sexual ethic. We want our faith to enter more directly into our sexual decisions and activity as that there will be a closer integration of sexuality and spirituality.

HOW WE MAKE OUR DECISIONS

We ask ourselves not only how our spirituality and sexuality relate but also how we make ethical decisions regarding the physical expression of our sexuality. As we reflect together on our resources and criteria for making decisions, we discover that we frequently agree on the general criteria, the values we want to live by, even though we differ on the motivation for using them and the conclusions reached in applying them.

What resources have we been using to make decisions that will be responsible and Christian? Our primary resource, because of our isolation, has been our individual experience and reflection. Health concerns influence our sexual decisions because of possible consequences to ourselves and others. Reading and prayer, traditional resources for making decisions, are next in importance. Most of us regard other traditional resources - scripture study, advice from confessor or spiritual mentor, formal religious education - as less helpful. Most of us have not found official teaching on sexuality at all helpful in making decisions.

Although we agree that a sexual ethic centered solely on procreation in the context of heterosexual marriage is not relevant to our experience as gays and lesbians, the criteria we use for sexual decisions are not so easily identified. We say that we respond to Christ's call to be loving when our primary concern is for the quality of our relationships. The values on which we base our relationships come through clearly: mutual respect, caring, compassion, trust, understanding, and generosity. What emerges from our experience and reflection is an emphasis on persons and on actions that further personal and spiritual growth. We hear a call to an intimacy in relationships that links sexuality and spirituality. It is a call that Christians identify with Jesus, who challenged the disciples to love God totally and to love all others as themselves (Matthew 22:34-40). It is a call that Christians recognize as the ongoing presence of the Spirit.

Generally, we seek relationships that are whole and not just the expression of genital sexuality. Most of us almost instinctively reject sexual activity that is selfish or manipulative, that harms or exploits. Some prefer to reserve sexual lovemaking for one person in the context of a lifelong commitment, and many regard lifelong fidelity in a monogamous relationship as the ideal to strive for. Other couples have remained faithful to one another while allowing for some sexual expression outside their relationship, and some attempt completely open relationships. Others of us are sexually active as singles, either because we choose to be single, or because we have not yet found a companion. Some of us abstain from sexual activity for a variety of reasons.

What motivates our use of these criteria? Some base their decisions on values that they believe contribute to a good human life. Some base their decisions on what they see as God's will for them. Some base their decisions on how they identify as disciples of Jesus. Whatever the motivation and rationale, the actual criteria differ very little.

Most of us have said that we developed decision-making criteria ourselves, but, when we discuss them together, we find that our faith in Jesus Christ and our identification with the Christian community strongly influence our lifestyles as lesbians and gays. We recognize wrongdoing and sin in our sexual activity when we realize that we have violated our personal convictions or that our relationship with God has been harmed. Social convention and Church regulations have little impact. Our understanding of sexual ethics thus seems to be centered more on character and personal values than on rules.

Diversity of sexual and genital behavior is more visible and more openly discussed in the gay and lesbian community than it is among heterosexuals. We differ among ourselves in evaluating some of these practices. As we discuss them together, we are challenged to recognize the quality of each relationship and to find within it the presence of God. In doing so, we find that we can come to a greater understanding of sexual rituals that are not part of our own lovemaking. We see this as a valuable way of continuing to learn from one another and to care for one another.

As Catholic lesbians and gays we have struggled to affirm our place in the divine plan for salvation. We have emerged from our struggle strong in our faith, respectful of the human person, tolerant of diversity, supportive of the struggles of others, and strongly committed to seeking justice for ourselves and all our sisters and brothers.

Our struggles are not yet finished. We must continue to speak frankly of our experience as gay and lesbian Catholics in order to live and grow in Christ while helping others. We have often been too much in awe of the Church as institution to speak. We have listened to Church officials - sometimes abiding by their restrictions, sometimes rejecting them. Sometimes, like children seeking a parent's approval, we have asked our leaders to change their positions and accept us. Too rarely have we gone further.

Fear makes us hesitate: fear of publicity, fear that greater visibility will cost us what we have gained, fear of further reprisals from Church authorities, fear that what we say will divide us. But greater fears have been overcome, and we are the better for it. To remain faithful, we must go further.

Section Two: Living and Growing as Sexual Christians

TAKING RISKS

Spiritual growth contains the responsibility to take risks. We risk when we speak and act without the encouragement and support of the wider community of faith. We risk when we state our experience despite those who reject it. We risk when we deepen our understanding in faith of that experience. We risk when we discern the truth of that experience even though the truth may challenge us to deal with our own differences and prejudices. Only by taking such risks can we commit ourselves to a fuller life as lesbian and gay Christians.

Engaging ourselves wholeheartedly in the process of spiritual growth requires us to accept the challenge of being sexual as responsible Christians. That not only entails acknowledging the discrepancy between official Church teaching and our own experience as gay and lesbian Christians but also includes the responsibility of forming our consciences as Christians. Only then can we be free from sinful structures - including those of our own making - and thereby faithful to the Christ whose disciples we are.

The struggle for justice and peace is not limited to seeking equality for sexual minorities nor to developing a whole and healthy sexuality and sexual ethic.

We recognize that these are partial manifestations of God's reign. Yet they are particular tasks we accept as lesbian and gay Christians. As members of Dignity, we have committed ourselves to the struggle for justice in the Church and in society.

THE CHALLENGE TO BE SEXUAL

In our culture individuals are often reluctant to relate sexuality and spirituality to one another or to discuss questions of sexual ethics because such discussions frequently deteriorate into condemnations and prohibitions. Explaining how we understand and use key terms in this document may therefore be helpful for the discussion we hope it will encourage.

- **SEXUALITY** is the human ability to be attracted to one another and to enter into relationships by which we receive and give life.
- **GENITALITY** is that aspect of human sexuality by which we, as bodily beings, use our sexual organs to give and receive pleasure as part of the expression and creation of union and intimacy. Genitality is not simply a biological function but is a component of human intimacy.
- **INTIMACY** is that experience of comfortable closeness in which individuals lower their barriers and enter into each others' lives through acts of trust, respect, affection, and love.
- **SPIRITUALITY** is the way we experience and respond to God's call to grow personally in relationship with God and others. Spiritual growth itself involves integration, a process of achieving wholeness. For Christians the source, model, and context for this growth is Jesus Christ.
- **ETHICS** is the analysis of decisions as to their rightness or wrongness; it is also the assessment of the values upon which those decisions are based.
- **SEXUAL ETHICS** deals with decisions and values in the area of sexuality and genitality. Since ethics serves spiritual growth, an authentic sexual ethic requires as its foundation an integration of spirituality and sexuality, an element that has been missing from the Catholic Christian experience.

- **PERSONAL INTEGRATION** is the process of becoming aware of the various components of one's life, examining them in the light of available knowledge and experience, and accepting them as one's own. All this, for Christians, is to allow the Spirit to fill our lives ever more fully so that Christ may be revealed in us and we in Christ.

The traditional understanding of sexuality and its genital expression has often been fragmented and limited. Our own experience suggests a sense of wholeness. Sexuality and its genital expression are indeed multifaceted. It is communication and intimacy. It is fun, and it is vulnerability. It is ritual. It is power, and it is tenderness. The dimensions of sexuality's tremendous potential lead us, almost inevitably, to risk the uncertainty and fear of ongoing exploration. What we know and realize may hold other facets of meaning and expression yet to be discovered.

As we continue to deepen our understanding, we realize the challenge is not to explain or defend who we are. It is to understand ourselves as graced and our sexuality as a gift. The further challenge is to discover how to cherish this gift with gratitude and to enrich our lives by a genital activity, or an abstinence from activity, which respects individuality and reveals the presence of God in our lives as Christians.

Basic to this challenge is the need to experience our sexuality and its genital expression as a sacramental encounter with our Creator. In such playful, enriched, and graced moments, we experience our God as close, active, and all encompassing, present in and through the other who loves and is loved. We recognize that dishonesty or selfish holding-back in these moments distorts the activity and disrupts our deeper relationship with God. Experiencing sexuality and genitality as a sacramental encounter with God is at the heart of a fully Christian sexual life.

We emerge from a flawed tradition that often dichotomizes body and soul and consequently separates sexuality from spirituality. In the past, Church officials have taught that we, as gays and lesbians, had made a free choice contrary to nature. We were told that our attraction to members of our own gender was a refusal to accept God's will for sexual union. Now Church officials admit that our sexual identity may not be the result of deliberate choice.

To some extent they distinguish between sexual orientation and genital activity. Yet they still insist that our sexual identity is an objective disorder, a tendency toward an intrinsic moral evil, and that any genital expression of it is absolutely forbidden.

This we cannot accept. We see sexuality as an intrinsic, integral, and essential aspect of our human personhood, not a separate one. We reclaim our sexuality and its genital expression as intrinsically good.

We are not alone in regarding official teachings on issues of sexuality as not in touch with human experience.

At the core of official teaching on sexuality is the prohibition of any genital expression of sexuality outside marriage and of any genital sexual expression within marriage not open to procreation.

This ethic increasingly is regarded as irrelevant and unacceptable by heterosexuals, both those who are married in the Church and those, like the divorced, the widowed, the handicapped, and the single, who are sexually disenfranchised.

Scholars have shown the inadequacy of an ethic that regards sexual intimacy essentially as an agreement to procreate. Vatican Council II implicitly acknowledged this inadequacy when, in speaking of the purpose of marriage, it refused to subordinate mutual love and companionship to the procreation and education of children (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 50).

We believe that we remain fundamentally sexual at all times, whether we choose to be genitally active or genitally abstinent. We find that the more sexuality is integrated into the totality of our lives, the more joyful and peaceful is its genital expression. Thus, we are Christians both at prayer and at play. We are equally the temple of the Holy Spirit when we worship and when we make love.

FORMING CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

We have a responsibility as members of the Christian community to seek common understanding and communion in that which makes us Christian. We therefore reaffirm the primacy of the individual conscience and accept the responsibility for its continuing formation in community. From that attentiveness to conscience and its continuing formation in community emerges a shared ethic.

We use the word "conscience" in several ways, corresponding to the various dimensions of conscience. Broadly, conscience is our experience of responsibility as we exercise our freedom. One dimension of this is our attraction to what is good. Another dimension is the body of knowledge and values we use in making our decisions. A third, the most practical expression of conscience, is the personal, considered judgment that individuals have to make on what they ought to do or not do. Christians see themselves making this judgment in the gracious presence of God as they seek to be like Christ.

Such attention to conscience and its formation is important if we indeed claim to remain Catholic while disagreeing with Church authorities. The Catholic tradition neither identifies nor separates authority and conscience: since both authority and conscience depend upon God, neither can dominate or ignore the other.

In the Catholic tradition, "authority" refers to the sources presumed able to give instruction on God's will; e.g., scripture, tradition, Church officials, various experts, and collective human experience. Authority is always presumed to have insight into God's will because it represents the accumulated wisdom of the Christian people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet authorities can obviously disagree on how the Spirit is guiding God's people. They can also make mistakes in identifying the movement of the Spirit. Thus, according to Catholic tradition, individuals are not only free to go against authority's recommendation but also morally required to do so if they have responsibly concluded that it is mistaken and that dissent, in theory or in practice, does not violate others' rights or endanger the common good. As Vatican Council II stated, "Deep within conscience humans discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves but which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For humans have in their heart a law inscribed by God. Their dignity lies in observing this law, and by it they will be judged." (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 16).

Forming conscience goes deeper than decisions or knowledge and values. It reaches to the heart of how we become the persons we are and want to be. A formed conscience consists of the freely made commitments and the freely established loyalties by which we shape character and become virtuous. For us as Christians it means that we do not live without a model or in isolation. We commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, and we remain loyal to the community of faith, in which we are caught up in the mystery of Christ.

We strive in Christ who lived and died and rose to include us in a communion so filled with life that we are called members of the Body of Christ. We accept the Christ who is vulnerable and sensitive. We experience the Christ who promises and comforts and consoles. We rely on the Christ who liberates and supports and heals. We commit ourselves to the Christ who is ever faithful and truthful and open. We live the Christ who loves and sustains and fulfills life.

The story of Jesus' life and death shapes our vision as Christians. We are challenged to live as Jesus lived and do what he did (see John 13:15). Jesus discussed scripture with others and challenged interpretations which contradicted his own insights. Jesus shared his faith and prayer with many different people. By conscience he judged his actions and he concluded how God wanted him to act. Through these means, both personal and communal, Jesus envisioned and then lived according to that vision in order to realize God's reign.

We form conscience in community, not in isolation, and so we must reconsider and reclaim the resources that the community of faith has found helpful over the centuries. When we study scripture together, we grow in knowledge and wisdom. When we seek each other's counsel, or when we identify individuals whose lives reflect holiness and commitment to the Gospel, we test the validity of our individual reflections and find that they become stronger for having been challenged. When we, as People of God, engage in dialogue over questions of ultimate meaning and when we worship together, we reflect on our experience and find communal wisdom under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who has anointed us (*Constitution on the Church*, 12).

Forming conscience is the lifelong process of becoming like Christ. We are called to love one another as Christ loves us (John 13:34). That is always more than we are capable of doing, but that is no reason for discouragement. As we renew our own determination to live as Christ, we realize and accept the reality of the imperfect, the partial, the human.

Section Three: The Challenge of the Future

As we reflect together on our experience as a lesbian and gay People of God and how to help one another grow as faithful disciples of Jesus, we recognize ways in which the Spirit leads us to a fuller experience of God's reign. This recognition is the basis of our hope, but it also contains challenges. Most important among those challenges are to accept responsibility for formulating a gay and lesbian sexual ethic, to develop the experience of Church that we have, and to continue to seek personal, communal, and ecclesial integration.

SEXUAL ETHICS

We are working toward a profound assessment of our sexual expression within the context of our spirituality. Struggling with difficult questions — even with the lack of clarity and certainty is for us life-affirming. This is why we commit ourselves to wrestling with the unresolved questions in the light of Gospel values.

We believe we share a vital role in formulating a sexual ethic comprehensive enough to apply to all persons. Our part is to ensure that the lesbian and gay experience of sexuality and genitality is represented. We must speak of what we know, and we must learn together with our heterosexual brothers and sisters what Christ is teaching Christians.

We must continue to identify the values that are expressed or sought in the sharing of this life-affirming sexual ethic and to clarify them in the light of the Gospel. We invite gay and lesbian Christians to consider their experience and to correct or validate what we say here. Much of what we have shared about our experience and our convictions is not yet complete, and so we invite the members of our community to continue their exploration of sexual ethics.

We can tolerate diversity. Nevertheless, we must explore together and learn from one another about issues of justice and morality. That includes such areas of serious ethical concern as pornography, prostitution, sex with minors, multiple partners, anonymous sex, bondage and discipline, and how to have sex safely. We cannot shy away from controversy if we are genuinely trying to see Christ in the sacramental reality of our lives.

The authors of *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought*, a study commissioned by The Catholic Theological Society of America, identify seven significant values in sexual behavior which promote "creative growth and human integration." We offer questions based on these values with the hope that they may be helpful as we continue to seek growth as sexual Christians and especially as we discuss areas of controversy:

- **SELF-LIBERATING:** Does it express one's authentic self and wholesome self—interest as a source and means of growth toward maturity? Does it enslave the self with bonds of compulsion and selfishness?
- **OTHER-ENRICHING:** Does it express a generous interest in, and concern for, others' well-being? Does it coerce or violate another person or show cruelty?
- **HONEST:** Does it express the real relationship that exists? Does it seduce and manipulate behind a facade of pretense?
- **FAITHFUL:** Does it express a consistent pattern of interest and concern that can grow deeper and richer? Does it refuse to let intimacy grow?

- **SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE:** Does it express a realization of relationship to wider communities and of service to their interests? Does it contribute to an atmosphere of exploitation or depersonalization?
- **LIFE-SERVING:** Does it express a willingness to share and promote life as well as fulfill one's own needs? Does it allow a relationship to become a mutual or shared selfishness?
- **JOYOUS:** Does it express appreciation for the gift of life and the mystery of love? Does it weaken the other person's self-esteem or ability to enjoy sex and relationships?

A new pattern of sexual life is developing in our world, one that is more human and humane, in tune with people's experience. We want to help ensure that the new pattern is balanced with responsibility and recognition of the value of intimacy.

BEING CHURCH IN THE LESBIAN AND GAY COMMUNITY

While many of us feel unwelcome in traditional parish communities, we do not pursue our Christian vocations alone. There are smaller communities of men and women who, united in Christian faith and worship, choose to be accountable to the Almighty together and consequently to each other. Together, as a People of God, we need to minister to one another and to pursue the ethics of our sexual expression, emerging as men and women strengthened in our faith, our commitment, and our love.

Dignity and the communities like us have been sources of faith and strength. They have made it possible for us to come together as gay and lesbian Christians and to realize that we are linked with believing brothers and sisters of all times and places. Together we discuss basic issues of faith and sexuality with our friends. We listen together to what God is saying. Together we minister to the sick, the needy, the lonely, the alienated, and to one another. We play together, cry together, pray together, and work together.

The Dignity community and others like us are experiences of being Church. Although generally organized on the foundation of shared sexual identity, these communities go beyond that single issue. They are a source of peace, healing, and reconciliation, signs of the Spirit's presence. They enable us to rediscover our own worth and to minister to one another and to the world. In them we have a grassroots experience of Church where we are able to realize and to express our responsibility to and for one another. We can together be agents, like Jesus, through whom the Spirit continues to bring good news to the poor and to set captives free (see Luke 4:17–21).

This is an experience of Church as a community of disciples where traditional barriers are taken down, where all are welcome and able to contribute. Our communities must provide this experience of living, liberating, and reconciling Church where Christians come together as equals, knowing that they are disciples of Christ. As Dignity we accept responsibility for one another and for Christ's work of justice and unity in the world. Together we strive to discern God's will and God's presence in the lives of all.

We acknowledge our deep human need for symbols and rituals and we celebrate the sacramental dimension of our lives in communal worship. We welcome new members into our community, including baptizing our natural and adoptive children. We continue to break bread in the name of Jesus. We forgive and seek forgiveness. We celebrate God's call to service through affirmation of those who are called to minister among us. We bless and console those who bless and console us as they face illness and death.

We need the affirmation and validation of a loving community when we make commitments to one another as couples. Through ritual, as witness to our unions, our community becomes a presence of grace and symbol of God's blessing. We commit ourselves to support each other in the continued celebration of our love. We also need to recognize and celebrate the choice of a single life style and to ritualize other significant moments of our lives. In our tradition, for example, loss and separation and break-up are rarely acknowledged and celebrated in rituals other than funeral and memorial services. Yet these are probably the moments when we most need the consolation that a loving gathering can provide.

SEEKING INTEGRATION

We seek the integration of our sexuality and our spirituality. We seek the integration of women and men of all races and ways of life into our communities. We seek integration into the whole of society and into the Church of which we are a part. The basis for all this is the reconciliation that is God's gift to us in Christ and which makes us ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

Our particular concern here has been the integration of sexuality and spirituality. We share with all Christians the life-long struggle to unify all aspects of our lives, including our genital expression, under the reality of the Christian Gospel and the values to which that Gospel urges us — love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). The development and growth of these values is a life-long endeavor; there is no point at which we stop and say that we have all the answers or that we have done all that we can.

We are not the only people who seek to integrate their genital expression with their lived Christian experience. Our brothers and sisters who are bisexual face a similar, if not more difficult, challenge of integration. Yet this challenge is shared by all the People of God — lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual. That shared challenge can be used as a means to end the segregation that exists among the People of God. It can help bring us together to become an expression of the true message of Christ — love in unity with each other and, through Christ, with God.

We must welcome into our communities all who seek this integration. In order to provide a context for integrating spirituality and sexuality and for promoting growth, we must root out from our midst whatever divides us. Racism, sexism, ageism, and any other ideology or practice that separates and alienates can have no place. We must learn to understand and respect ways that differ from our own. We cannot complain of societal and ecclesiastical oppression and then lay unnecessary burdens on one another. Furthermore, we must stand in solidarity with those who seek to eradicate all forms of injustice and oppression.

We meet together as Christians on the basis of our shared sexual identity, and so, in many of our communities, denominational boundaries have been transcended. Gay and lesbian Christians from different churches have been able to be together, respecting one another's traditions while acknowledging unity in faith and baptism. We must deepen this unity in fidelity to the Spirit of the Gospel.

We will continue to reach out to those who are alienated from the Church. We feel a responsibility toward those who have shared the faith and love of Christ but who no longer walk with us. We must show them understanding and compassion and the love of a God who cares too deeply ever to let go. We grieve especially for those who despair of God's love because they have not felt Christians' love and for those who have died without the Eucharist because they felt excluded from the Church.

We must reach out to those who cannot understand why we remain part of a faith community that seems to have no room for us. We must speak to them the Gospel message and show that the Church's truth is greater than its error. We have a special responsibility to lesbians and gays, believers or not, who, in whatever way, show in their persons the suffering Christ, especially those with AIDS. God's love for them must be evident in our concern and compassion.

Finally, we seek integration within our Church as Christ's gay and lesbian disciples. We offer forgiveness to those who have misjudged and hurt us, and we ask forgiveness of those whom we have hurt. As Church we commit ourselves to maintaining and strengthening the bonds of communion that unite us with all disciples of the Risen Savior. If we are united and live in peace, the God of love and peace will be with us (see 2 Corinthians 13:11).

Conclusion

As members of Dignity, we are Christ's disciples, a lesbian and gay People of God in the Body of Christ, part of the Catholic tradition. Our sexuality is God's holy gift to us. In it, and in our genital activity, we want to meet our God. We continue to explore how to live sexually in an ethically responsible manner that is consonant with the teachings of Christ. We do so by reflecting on our personal experience and learning from those who are engaged in similar reflection. We do so by praying together and celebrating Christ's presence in our midst in Word and Sacrament. We do so under the guidance of the Spirit, who will lead us into the fullness of truth.

Additional Information

Appendix for the Sexual Ethics: Experience, Growth and Challenge, *A Pastoral Reflection for Lesbian and Gay Catholics* document can be found on the DignityUSA.org web site include:

- Appendix One: Chronology
- Appendix Two: Survey Results
- Appendix Three: Interview Questions

Our Vision

DignityUSA envisions and works for a time when gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Catholics are affirmed and experience dignity through the integration of their spirituality with their sexuality and, as beloved persons of God, participate fully in all aspects of life within the Church and Society.

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