

“RECALLING OUR ROOTS” DISCUSSION NOTES

Date of Discussion: January 28, 2018

Chapter /Community/Caucus: The Living Beatitudes Community (Dignity/Dayton)

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS

What was the initial need that Dignity was organized to meet and that drove our rapid growth from a local community in L.A. to a national network of chapters? What "fueled" our engine?

The need for a safe space to worship. Our discussion revealed that for us, Dignity/Dayton provided a safe space for gay Catholics to celebrate the Eucharist without fear of rejection or reprisal. One member mentioned John Fortunato’s book, *Embracing the Exile*, as emblematic of our sense of alienation as gay Christians and our growing desire to claim our rightful place in the church as well as in society. The Stonewall riots were also mentioned as a source of “fuel for our engine.”

The need to sanctify our relationships. We spoke about the fact that several of our married members met their spouses through our group, and that we serve as a means of sanctifying those relationships. A woman recalled that she and her life partner sought us out as a safe place to be recognized as a loving and committed couple. Nevertheless, she worried about their safety when attending our services, and wished that there were more women in our chapter in those early days.

The need to connect with other like-minded people. Several participants said that Dignity gave them a place to network with other LGBT folks, especially those with whom they shared a common spiritual background. We organized book discussions that continue to the present day, together with a variety of social outings. One member recalled how a roller-skating party in the late 1980’s led to covert surveillance by a local TV news channel, complete with grainy footage of us sneaking out the back door of the rink!

Another member fondly recalled the Dignity regional meetings and national conventions that he attended, and how they broadened both his spiritual horizon and his array of friends. In the age before cell phones, Facebook and on-line dating services, this provided an effective way for us to meet new people, share stories of our spiritual journeys, and keep in touch.

The (early) support of the Catholic Church. Another source of “fuel” that we discussed was the support from certain facets of the Catholic Church in those early days. In specific, we were blessed to have the active endorsement and participation of Marianist brothers and priests who were affiliated with the University of Dayton; in fact, one of the brothers served as our president in the late 80’s. We recalled how our meetings were often held on Marianist properties, including the UD campus. One member, a UD alumnus, said that their endorsement sent a powerful message of acceptance and support. We talked about how we also met on diocesan church property with the archbishop’s knowledge and blessing, and how we came to be evicted.

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Small church movement. A number of the comments centered on the advantages afforded to us by virtue of being a “small church.” This trend is even stronger now. We agreed that our ability to engage in post-homily discussions has been the impetus for our chapter’s survival and growth. We feel the need to share our thoughts about the readings and homilies, particularly from a progressive Christian perspective.

The small size of our community allows us to share a meal after our services. The cookies and punch of the early days has evolved into a full brunch, but the main attraction has remained constant: a chance to join together in fellowship as a community.

Speaking of food, one member reminded us that Dignity/Dayton sponsored our city’s first-ever Gay Pride Dinner in the mid-80’s, an event that continues to the present day. Examples like this testify to the fact that we not only rode the swell of gay pride in those years, but that we also were instrumental in bolstering it.

How did the mission of Dignity evolve over time? What drove those changes in how we did our work? Consider dynamics in the organization, in the Church, and in society. In what ways might your chapter/community/caucus have contributed to this evolution?

Ratzinger Letter. We spent quite a bit of time discussing how Cardinal Ratzinger’s infamous “Halloween Letter” was a major milestone in our evolution. After the exchange of a series of carefully nuanced letters between us and Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, we came to realize that we had to state unequivocally (and fully acknowledge internally) that we believe that same-sex relationships can be life-giving and life-affirming. The impacts of this were both positive and negative:

- A few of our members left our chapter over differences with our stated position. They felt that it is better to try to change the church from within rather than from outside.
- We essentially lost our Marianist support. Those of us who had taken solace from them now had to find new ways to engender our self-acceptance and sense of worth.
- We began to realize that *we are the church*—a major change in our organizational and personal perspectives. Dignity was seen less as our collective voice to the Catholic Church and more as a church in its own right.
- We also began to realize that we would have to look outside the official church for presiders, as we had lost several of our Catholic priests. Allowing women and non-ordained celebrants was a fundamental change.
- Alienated by the church’s rigid stance, more straight people left their churches to join ours. Their presence sent a potent message of acceptance. They increased the size, gender diversity and financial resources to our group. For those of us who had led closeted lives, their unconditional acceptance made us feel like valued members of society.

Women’s equal participation. The impact of the Ratzinger letter, combined with the burgeoning women’s equality movement, led to women joining us in increasingly larger

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numbers. Women now outnumber the men by a small percentage. Two of our four presidors are women, lending their unique perspective to our services. This ended our long struggle to integrate both women and men into our chapter.

The theme of our 50th Anniversary Conference is "True to the Spirit, True to Ourselves." In what ways has "being true to ourselves and true to the calling of the Spirit" evident in our history? Your local history?

Our community has encouraged us to step into the light as LGBTQI and progressive Christians. We recalled how, in our early years, we would never refer to our members by their last names in our newsletters and other communications for fear of reprisal. Curtains were drawn when we met in members' homes, which was a frequent occurrence. One member shared how his security clearance was immediately suspended, placing his job in peril, when a co-worker reported that he attended "gay Catholic religious services that promoted deviant lifestyles" and that he had been in the gay pride march in Washington, DC.

We are now open and honest about who we are and what we believe. We no longer define ourselves as a gay community, but rather one that is open to everyone.

A number of our straight members have gay children and went through a similar "coming out" process. One such member belonged to a local parish before joining us. She relayed her experience in trying to establish a gay support group in the parish, knowing that there were a number of other parishioners who had gay children. After 18 months of placing announcements in the church bulletin, she gave up because she had not received a single phone call. "We were trained to be silent on this issue," she said. When the archbishop sponsored a series of public meetings about the gay issue throughout the archdiocese, she attended every one and spoke out boldly in our defense. "I was never afraid!", she declared.

Locally, and nationally, how has Dignity changed lives for the better? Changed the Catholic Community? Impacted the LGBTQ social justice movement?

One of our presidors mentioned that when various religions are polled, Catholics consistently come out on top in terms of supporting gay rights, and he feels that Dignity can claim some of the credit for that fact. He also mentioned that Dignity literally "changed the Bible," referring to our work in lobbying for a replacement of the term "homosexual" with a more theologically sound and less offensive term in a specific passage of *The New American Bible*.

A participant commented on the fact that this year marks our tenth anniversary with our host, Christ Episcopal Church. We are proud of the fact that they treat us as valued members of their extended parish and rely on our support of their outreach programs and major fundraising events.

Such relationships strengthen our belief that our chapter and others across the country have been instrumental in conveying a positive image to the American public of LGBTQI people in general, and LGBTQI Catholics in particular. We are confident that we have helped in at least some small measure in achieving the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

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We have become strongly focused on social justice issues. In fact, our community has established a Social Justice Committee with the intention of galvanizing our members into action to respond not only to LGBTQI issues but also to race/white privilege, death penalty, criminal justice, economic and environmental issues.

As our community continues to grow, we are attracting more members from other faiths. Their perspectives enrich our services and deepen our awareness of other views.

As discussed above, community changes lives for the better by providing a way to sanctify and honor our relationships; by giving us paths to spiritual growth through both traditionally Catholic avenues as well as an array of nontraditional approaches; by affording women the opportunity to pursue their calling to be spiritual leaders; by bringing together straight and LGBTQI people in open and affirmative spiritual and social activities; and by serving as a platform for us to speak our truth to the church and to society at large.