

Dignity Houston
“Our Roots” Conversation
Facilitator: Roy B (president)
February 2018

Rationale: The following is a conversation covering the first two questions concerning “Our Roots,” a facilitated conversation held to unearth Dignity/Houston’s evolution and overall contribution to the LGBTQ+ Catholic Movement as a Chapter of DignityUSA. It was very difficult to get members to speak at any length on the national organization or to draw connections between the evolution of the Houston Chapter and the National Organization [DignityUSA]. Nevertheless, the conversation reveals the evolution of the local chapter, in particular its liturgy and some of its social ministry. On the date of the conversation, chapter membership stood at nineteen members total.

The primary speaker apparent is George W, a long-time member of Dignity/Houston in his 80s. George mostly leads the liturgy for the Dignity/Houston community these days, and he is an active and concerned member on both political and church matters. Among other things, he is a retired educator. Other members present included Kelly M, also one of Dignity/Houston’s longest attending members, Kathleen “Kathy” J, Frank A, Roy B [facilitator], Kenneth H, April W (a new member), and David M, although not on the roster, a faithful attendee.

Question:

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 have contributed to this evolution?

Kathy: We wrote our own services.

George: Yet remember, before we wrote our own services, we had a regular supply—pretty regular supply—of Roman Catholic priests, or retired Roman Catholic priests, who would say Mass for us. Without a problem.

Kenneth: She’s talking about the evolution.

Kathy: Right.

George: When we got the new Cardinal, he said that there would be no mass for us, and they’ve said that in a lot of places. But this guy said it in spades. And he told a retired priest who we had, who was from Beaumont originally, “if you continue to say Mass for Dignity, I will cut off your health insurance and your pension. (silence) And he stopped saying Mass for us.

Kathy: In San Antonio, do they still have Catholic priests who say Mass for them? Didn’t they get kicked out of the Catholic Church where they used to meet at?

George: They were meeting in a convent, and I'm not sure where they're meeting now, but yes, they have Roman Catholic priests who say Mass for them.

Kathy: I think that is one of the frustrating things for people who come to us is that they want affirmation from a priest—that being gay is okay—and they feel like that they would want to see someone. But let me stay on the subject here. The evolution...

Roy: Yeah, so what caused the changes in the way that we work as an organization, and how have our changes been important nationally for DignityUSA? One way that you've noted already is the liturgy—and it is significant, because in many ways, we've organically demonstrated for the national organization how a chapter, as an example, may transition from a priestly-centered people to an organization that writes and leads its own liturgy—albeit a liturgy based heavily on the Roman one—and at that, one where we may or may not be saying a Mass, but nonetheless where we are worshipping and finding fellowship with one another through our own incarnation of an Intentional Eucharistic Community.

George: Well and to be perfectly honest, between when the Roman Catholic priests could say Mass for us and this [what we have today], we went through a period when we were pretending like we were doing a Mass. We were reading out of our own missal, and we followed all of the thing. And it got to the point where—well, uh, for myself—where I just said “look I am not going to pretend that we are actually having Mass.” And, uh, some wanted to do that, and I just said “fine, do that.” Well, that lasted a while, not weeks, but not months either, and then we decided that we've got to, well, we've got to *cope with this*, and that's when we came up with the liturgy we have now. And we have some of the elements from the Roman Missal, Gospel Readings, etc. But although we are going through bread, and consecrating bread and wine, we are not pretending (a) that I'm a priest or (b) that you are doing the Roman ritual. Because you're not. And in some ways that's good. But in some ways that's not so good.

Kathy: That's why we have the main organization [DignityUSA] to try to fight for us with one voice.

George: That is right. And you can only do that—I mean—we could stand out there in front of the Cathedral and hold banners up, and I don't think in a hundred years DiNardo would change his mind or ever talk to us...because he is definitely 'old guard,' and he thinks he is leading the 'old guard.' He was just president for two years of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and he knows all about Courage. There are two Courage Chapters in almost every diocese in the United States. Courage is an institution developed by the Roman Catholic Bishops which views homosexuality as A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) views alcoholism: it is an evil thing that you must do everything in your power to avoid.

Frank: And yet they do their own thing behind closed doors.

George: I don't know. But what I do know is that Courage is almost exclusively males; it seems women find going to a priest who's running a Courage Group, and them telling them how to behave sexually as just beyond the pale.

Kathy: Right. I know I don't have the right to judge, but I just feel like Cardinal DiNardo in an important way will have to deal with Jesus because the thing he did to the priest who used to come here and say Mass, and who, I have a feeling is gay himself, the thing of making him run a Courage group [here in Houston] is just a really...

Frank: They're so hypocritical. They're just saying one thing and then doing the opposite. In other words, do as I say and don't do as I do...

George: Well, be careful...you don't know what any one individual is doing.

Roy: So, we've talked about the liturgy, and we've talked about, uh...well, what about the social outreach? I know the social outreach has changed because of a reduced number of members, but I am curious as far as your own memories are concerned, I mean, I know there used to be a Stone Soup fundraiser, or something that was going on over at the Disco Kroger on Montrose. That members did from time to time.

George: Stone Soup was a food bank for people with AIDS, and every Christmas we would sing Christmas carols on a Saturday, starting from about nine until about five, busy as any Kroger should be...and we did that there for a handful of a number of years. But what has happened is, huh, homosexuality is far more acceptable and accepted in the general society we live in.

Kelly: Of the world...

George: In much of the world. And even gay, even *Catholics* are supportive of gay marriage as parents realize that they've got children that are gay...they didn't make them gay, they were gay on their own. They the grown adult child knew that they were gay—me, I'm so damn old, I didn't come out until I was over thirty years old! I was scared. First of all, I did not want to admit that I was gay.

Kelly: I can beat that! I didn't come out until I was over forty.

George: I was eight years in the seminary (Jesuits), and never admitted that I was gay. Three years out, I finally admitted I was gay. It took a lot, but it was just very very very under-denial under, all...oh, all kinds of stuff [referring to his time in religious life]. But the Society [Society of Jesus] has changed, and unfortunately the truth is that the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church has not changed. To give you a classic example, we are meeting in a meeting house of the Episcopal Church [St. Stephen's Episcopal Church at The Havens Center]. And this church now ordains women, married men, married women, and as far as I know gay men and women married or not. And what has the Roman Catholic Church done? Nada. Now, having said that, today we [Dignity/Houston] have fewer than 25 members, because among other things,

Montrose has been gentrified beyond belief and its no longer economical for gays to live here as they once did, in droves.

Kathy: Oh, because it was much more affordable.

George: Yes, and the gay bars were here. Now gays don't have to go to gay bars—some still do, but the number of gay bars there are in town is down to a handful.

Frank: And all [laughing] the gays are coming to Northside.

George: Yeah.

Frank: They're paying 450K for a house!

Kathy: I mean that's the thing about the gay community. A lot of us are very rich, and a lot of us are poor. But I mean social, wouldn't you consider this service a social outreach, for people to be able to come here and to share their spirituality? I mean, I wonder sometimes why we don't have more members and I think back in the day, a lot more people thought that they weren't going to allow the church to tell them how to think or to let them decide who was Catholic.

[side conversation about birthday party—unrelated]

George: As people moved out, a lot of them are going to the parishes. They don't need us. When they come and look, they say "that's not Catholic."

Kathy: Right. "You don't have a priest. That's not the Mass."

George: We're doing what we can do, but it's limited and it isn't universally, uh, appreciated. And we certainly aren't getting any help from the Cardinal. In Chicago, they don't directly deal with Dignity, but the archdiocese has a gay Mass.

Frank: Okay, can we answer another question?

Roy: Those are the two, but I do want to re-focus really quickly, because I want to get back to the question, which was, what has been the most important social ministry that this organization has provided, and how has that changed, namely, what caused it to change? So if you were really to take a step back and look at Dignity/Houston, what would you say has been our most important social justice ministry or interaction with people of God who have needed help and that we have provided some kind of service, or help to, and why has that changed, or how has that changed? Because we've talked about the liturgy component which is the heart and the spirit, but if we move to the other one we talk about hands and how we are in touch with the ways that God is manifest in the world.

Kathy: Well, it must have been during the 80s related to the AIDS Crisis.

George: We had a pretty good and dedicated group of people who were working at Omega House which was an important hospice for AIDS patients. I would consider the Rosary making that we are doing today as important.

Frank: Grace Place.

George: Well, we were never directly involved with them, but we did a lot of things for Stone Soup, which was an AIDS agency, and I was a volunteer with them when the original name was called...well the symbol was a candle, and the logo was "it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness..." [remembering] oh, it was called the KS Foundation because Kaposi's Sarcoma was a disease which only affected 1% of the population in general, but with a suppressed immune system in the early days, it was frequently what killed you. And it got to be less as we learned how to work with that, and then there was that whole period with, you know, ACTUP, and there was a lot going on. I don't know that they were active here in Houston, but definitely in New York and Los Angeles. It was an organization that really made a difference with the drug companies, got the press involved, and changed a lot of the ways that we treat serious diseases where the likelihood is death. Well, why not try an experimental drug where for all intents and purposes they're going to die? Now does this turn those people into guinea pigs? Absolutely.

Kathy: Well they're going to learn something...

George: Exactly.

Frank: We have been active with HRC and also in Sabor de Northside [a local festival]. We have done gay pride, and all to let people know that we are here as an outreach.

Kathy: Right, and one of the things about the rosaries is that it connects people back to our Catholic faith. [Dignity/Houston, under the guidance of Kathleen F hand-makes rainbow colored rosaries to hand out to gay pride attendees as well as to visitors and interested individuals at various events].

Frank: And we gave out literature that we were here, and it explained what Dignity was all about—it gave them information and informed them that they are welcome to join us for services, or whatever.

Roy: Alright, so we have probably gone longer than we should have, but I appreciate you all answering those questions. So the most important ministry we've done to sum up?

Kelly: AIDS ministry.

George: I would say that that would be the most important external ministry we have done, but we have, and continue to hold a weekly liturgy, but I suspect, in looking at all the people sitting in the room including myself, that we might not have anything.

Frank: No. That's right. If I go to the regular service at the church near me, half the time I don't understand what they're saying, and I just don't feel comfortable. Not just because of me being gay, but I...I don't get anything out of it.

George: Well, that to me is one of the drawbacks of this [referring to our own liturgy]. This spoils us. I hate to say it, but it's true, because this spoils us, that we can do the kinds of things that we're doing right now, or permit attendees to have comments about the Gospel, or whatever.

David: Isn't that what religion is supposed to be?

George: Yes, but that is not what the Roman liturgy is all about.

David: And that's why we don't do that liturgy (laughing).

Frank (at the same time): Well isn't it what the apostles in fellowship did...and that's what we have here and also when we go out to eat...[the group goes out to a local restaurant for a meal every Saturday following liturgy].

George: That is correct...

Frank: We talk about problems, we talk about anything that's going on in our community, share information, and to me, that is the best thing I could do every Saturday evening.

George: Right. And going out to eat together isn't going to happen if you don't have a weekly liturgy.

Frank: No.

Roy: Thank you all for being so generous in your responses and in taking your time to reflect on our Chapter. I will be typing these reflections up to provide to DignityUSA.

Kathy: Thank you, Roy.

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