

Dignity Northern Virginia

Session 3

Topic:

Where are Dignity USA and Dignity Northern Virginia, as an organizations, going forward? How do we see our future?

Introduction

On Saturday evening, January 5, 2019, members of Dignity Northern Virginia met to address the third segment of the Dignity USA Jubilee project. The first and second sessions held earlier in 2018, reflected on Dignity USA and Dignity NoVA's past origins and purpose and their respective present day state of affairs as organizations.

For our third session, we had approximately 17 members in attendance. A good turnout as it represented most of our attendants at our weekly liturgical service. By way of context, our Dignity NoVA membership is almost equally represented by gender. Our membership is mostly an older (over 50) demographic. However, we have a few younger members who often join us at our weekly liturgy. And, although the group experiences some transiency, we have a core group of members that have been with Dignity NoVA for decades. Finally, while most members are Catholic, we attract individuals both gay and non gay, from other faiths who find Dignity NoVA a welcoming and safe place to worship and to participate in fellowship.

The Future of Dignity USA

We began our discussion of the future of Dignity USA and Dignity NoVA with a brief summary of our last two sessions to refresh memories and to set the stage for our third session. The moderator mentioned the origins and purpose of Dignity USA and the work and support it has provided our chapters, caucuses and individual members over the years in the face of an unaccepting Church. The origins and mission of Dignity NoVA, as an organization, since its establishment, almost 27 years ago, as a safe place for LGBT individuals to worship in the Roman Catholic tradition was also noted.

After discussing the current state of affairs within the Roman Catholic Church vis a vis our community and the spiritual needs of gay Catholics, the group came to a consensus that the same conditions of homophobia and exclusion that prompted the establishment of Dignity USA still exist in the wider Roman Catholic Church. And, as one member noted, while progress has been made toward a greater acceptance of, or at least a tolerance of LGBT people in the greater society, the acceptance of LGBT Catholics within the Church is not likely to be realized in our life time. Change, in the Church, is occurring, but very slowly and unevenly from within. Blatant homophobia, unfortunately still prevails.

Having considered this ongoing situation, our group agreed that Dignity USA will continue to be a vital force in the foreseeable future in advocating for us on a national level vis a vis those forces within

the Catholic Church that continue to be non affirming, non accepting and, unfortunately at times, blatantly homophobic.

One member reminded us that Dignity USA is the national face of our community to the Bishops and hierarchy within the Catholic Church and that supporting Dignity USA is vital. Another individual stated that the best way for our voices to be heard is to support the Dignity USA national organization in their advocacy/educational work. Dignity USA membership was noted to be about \$50 per year and that full or partial help with the membership fee was available through D/NoVA and its members. To paraphrase- in representation, numbers count, and membership and supporters of Dignity USA demonstrate to the Church hierarchy that LGBT Catholics are an active, vibrant part of the Catholic Church, and we matter. Another member added that while Dignity USA advocates for us, we can also advocate for ourselves and our community through “coming out” more to others we may meet in the world. In this way members can bear witness and plant seeds of mutual understanding and acceptance in the broader church and outside world.

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The Future of Dignity Northern Virginia

Next, the conversation segued into lively discussion on the future of Dignity NOVA. As before, our discussion began with a brief reflection on the purpose of Dignity NoVA- which offers a safe place where LGBT Catholics can be themselves, explore individual spiritual development, and worship together in the Roman Catholic tradition.

The topic of the future of Dignity NoVA going forward resonated with members in the group- the majority of whom are older as noted earlier in this report. Over the years, we have witnessed the departure through relocation and sadly, the death of many of the original founding members. And, while a new person will join us once, or twice, for our weekly liturgical service, most do not stay long enough to become regular attendees. This situation is of great concern and has prompted discussions on strategies to best reach out and encourage new people to join us.

The suggestions offered for encouraging people to join our community were varied. For instance, some individuals suggested that perhaps we make some changes in the way the liturgical service is performed (e.g. adding new music) to make it more varied and “fresh”. Another member suggested that members mention our liturgical services and Dignity NoVA to friends and people when we are in social situations thereby introducing our community to a wider audience. The question of how to reach the younger LGBT population (20s and 30s) made for an interesting discussion. All agreed that this younger demographic was the most challenging to reach due to social and cultural changes in U.S. since the 1980s. Unlike most members of our community who were raised during the 1950s to 1970s timeframe, when Catholic schools and Catholic youth groups were more numerous resulting in more children being educated and formed in the Catholic faith thereby influencing these youngsters to return to their faith later in life, the generation of 20 and 30 something LGBT people were raised in an increasingly more secular society when the numbers of Catholic schools and organizations offering formation in the Catholic faith are in decline or nonexistent. Moreover, this situation is compounded by the fact that unlike those older members of our community who, raised in the 1950s to 1970s, were closeted because our sexual orientation was considered immoral and “disordered,” the younger 20s and 30s LGBT demographic are growing up today, for the most part, in a more open society where being gay is less of a stigma for them. These two factors, greater secularization and greater societal acceptance and tolerance of LGBT individuals, makes joining an LGBT oriented Church like Dignity NOVA less important in their lives. The original reasons for joining a Dignity NOVA, e.g. a safe place to be gay and worship in Catholic tradition and to share fellowship with other LGBT people are less important for this younger demographic- being gay is more accepted and traditional forms of worship in the Church is not an experience they can relate to.

Nevertheless, having considered the challenges posed by attracting this younger demographic to join our community, one member proposed that we reach out to this younger group through the use of social media (e.g. Face book, Twitter, etc.)- A technology they understand and utilize- to make our presence known to them. Another member presented an idea to advertize our faith community to universities and colleges in the NOVA area with particular attention to Catholic institutions of higher learning, where younger LGBT students may have more religious interest and may consider joining us in worship or fellowship.

Another idea for attracting new prospective members focused on updating our Dignity NOVA webpage to be more accessible and information driven so that when people search the internet for a gay church in the area our Dignity NoVA community webpage will appear.

The discussion then turned to strategies on how to best attract older gay Catholics. Strategies proposed included; advertising our weekly liturgical service and social activities in community events sections of local Northern Virginia newspapers; visiting retirement communities to introduce ourselves and extend invitations to residents to join us at our liturgical and social events. And again, mentioning our faith and our liturgical services to those we meet socially in order to educate and inform the public about Dignity NOVA, our faith, and our activities.

Conclusion:

Our conversation on the future of Dignity USA and Dignity NoVA lasted about 85 minutes. Many comments and points of view were offered but a major take away is that Dignity USA and Dignity NOVA are both important, vital organizations in our lives today and they will continue to be for the foreseeable future in that they continue to offer a safe place for LGBT individuals to be ourselves and to worship in the Roman Catholic tradition. We, as a community, are aware of the changes occurring in society and the challenges these various changes bring to maintaining and growing our membership base. Nevertheless, Dignity NoVA will continue to face the future as an inclusive community and welcome all people who wish to worship with us. And in the spirit of goodwill and mutual understanding, we will continue to extend invitations to the Bishop and all those in the Church hierarchy to come join us in our liturgical celebrations.