

DIGNITY, Inc. :

an alternative experience of church

David Davidson

What is the church? Who is the church? Today that question is difficult to answer. A real marvel of contemporary Catholicism has been its ability to maintain within one church differing and sometimes blatantly opposed groups of believers. Throughout the United States pockets of church offer a spectrum of church experiences. Among those pockets are some 116 local chapters of DIGNITY, Inc., a lay organization of lesbian and gay Catholics and their friends, founded in Los Angeles in 1969. To a growing number of American Catholics, Dignity offers an alternative experience of church. Indeed, for most of its members, Dignity offers the only possible experience; without Dignity they would simply forget about being Catholic.

Certainly Dignity is on the fringe of official Roman Catholicism. Some believe that the October 30, 1986, Vatican '*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*' officially proscribes Dignity. But only consideration of what the Dignity chapters actually are would determine whether or not they provide an authentic Catholic experience of church. So here a priest who has ministered to various Dignity chapters for over ten years offers an inside picture so judgments to be made may be based on the evidence.

DIGNITY as a Local Church

The chapters of Dignity constitute discrete faith communities alongside other such communities within a universal communion. Dignity chapters serve as 'local churches'; or, in the terminology of liberation theology, they are *comunidades de base*. The explicit self-identity of Dignity certainly maintains as much:

We believe that gay Catholics are members of Christ's mystical body, numbered among the people of God. We have an inherent dignity because God created us, Christ died for us, and the Holy Spirit sanctified us in Baptism, making us His Temple, and the channel through which the love of God might become visible. Because of this, it is our right, our privilege, and our duty to live the sacramental life of the Church, so that we might become more powerful instruments of God's love working among all people.

These local church groups relate to the broader Catholic Church both institutionally and communally, though their status in both cases is ambiguous. As the Statement of Position and Purpose above makes clear, Dignity chapters consider themselves part of the Roman Catholic Church. They celebrate the Roman Catholic rituals and maintain Roman Catholic allegiance. Perhaps only their stance on sexual ethics, expressed in a carefully worded statement, presents a notable contrast:

We believe that gay and lesbian people can express their sexuality in a manner that is consonant with Christ's teaching. We believe that all sexuality should be exercised in an ethically responsible and unselfish way.

In any case, for better or worse, this position merely mirrors other variant positions common in Catholicism today—on birth control, liturgical practice, women's rights, nuclear disarmament, economic policy, and other issues. More on this below.

The degree of institutional legitimacy that Dignity enjoys varies from chapter to chapter, depending on the opinion of the local diocesan bishop. For all practical purposes in San Diego Dignity has long been banned. In New York and Philadelphia official support is given to Courage, a gay Catholic support group that believes homosexuality is an emotional disability and that advocates celibacy—though it is an open question whether celibacy is more prevalent among Courage than among Dignity members. Since the recent Vatican document, Dignity chapters in Atlanta, Brooklyn, Buffalo, New York and Pensacola have been expelled from church property. Yet in other dioceses Dignity chapters continue to meet as they had. And in Pensacola, as well as in Baltimore, Cleveland, Colorado Springs, Detroit, and Trenton, for example, bishops have presided at Dignity liturgies. In what has now become a notorious case, the 1983 Dignity International Convention celebrated its main liturgy in the Seattle cathedral. In San Antonio the Archbishop appointed a laywoman and a priest as official chaplains to the gay community, and they serve that community primarily through Dignity. The national Dignity office and local chapters have been in communication with many American bishops. The point is this: whether or not Dignity is or can be part of the institutional church is far from clear. The judgment seems to depend on how diocesan bishops view the issues and how they use local Dignity chapters as vehicles for ministry to the gay community.

Dignity's status as part of the Catholic fellowship is equally ambiguous. In fact, few parishes would welcome Dignity chapters into their church buildings. In its early history Dignity/Boston was evicted from a Catholic church and now meets in a Unitarian church. In 1985, Dignity/San Antonio was evicted from two churches within a month, victim of a slanderous campaign waged by a small, anonymous,

conservative, and supposedly Catholic group. Despite Dignity members' commitment to the Catholic Church and all efforts to educate other Catholics about homosexuality, Catholic circles, typical of our society at large, generally do not welcome openly gay people, whether as individuals or as organized groups. Gay Catholics represent members of the mystical body that many would rather amputate than embrace. So lesbian and gay Catholics were forced to form separate faith communities.

Focus of identity

What distinguishes Dignity chapters from other local churches? Only the insistence that homosexuality is God-given and so is not to be hidden or repressed.

This position appears to be unquestionable. Recent studies show that sexual orientation is irreversibly determined by about the age of three, so no one could be held responsible for his or her homosexuality. Moreover, there is no evidence that parents or siblings or any others play any decisive or culpable role in determining a child's homosexuality. So homosexuality cannot be the result of actual sin in any sense. Then, even if considered in the most pejorative sense possible—even as the recent Vatican document styles it: 'an objective disorder'—homosexuality would merely be like a natural handicap. And faith has always allowed that such a thing, if not willed by God, is certainly allowed by God and so should be accepted as 'God's will'. So one is called to accept and to make positive use of one's homosexuality and thus to achieve salvation for oneself and others. Note that word 'positive'. As will be made clear later in this article, taking this theological standpoint certainly does not mean that one is trying to countenance the sexual hedonism so widespread in our society—the contrary is the case.

Some Dignity members countenance homogenital relationships, but even here opinions differ. Some maintain this position within the legitimacy of broad Catholic teaching. Without explicitly questioning the official position on homogenital activity, they appeal to the Catholic Church's other teaching about the ultimate primacy of conscience in all moral decisions. In this they are like the millions of Catholic couples who practice birth control as a practical necessity but without challenging the official teaching on the subject.

Others do challenge the adequacy of the official Catholic position on homogenital activity. Well versed on this issue, they join the discussion within contemporary Catholicism on sexual ethics in general, aligning themselves with the liberal position on contraception and masturbation, other instances of non-procreative genital experience. Consistent with their self-identity as church, these gay Catholics claim new insight under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. On the basis of their

own experience as homosexual Catholics and on the basis of new information produced by the human sciences and historical and biblical research, they call for a re-thinking of official Catholic teaching.

Nevertheless, in no case do they advocate sexual promiscuity. These people are conscientiously grappling with sensitive ethical questions. If on this one issue their conclusions differ from magisterial teaching, they are certainly respectful of Roman Catholicism and committed to its deep tradition of faith, scholarship and community.

The formation of DIGNITY Chapters

People join Dignity for a variety of reasons. Of course, not all members are homosexual, but all would be supportive of the gay community.

Homosexual Catholics join Dignity primarily because they refuse to be cut off from the church and its ministry. Spiritual needs surface and demand to be met. Official affiliation with Dignity may take a long time. But when the decision to belong is finally made, it is usually made for spiritual reasons. Other organizations in the gay subculture could meet every other human need. In a secularized world it makes no sense to come to church except for spiritual reasons. This is clearly the case with Dignity.

This decision to belong is a freely chosen one. Lesbian and gay people are facing, and many have overcome, perhaps the most serious taboo in our culture—homosexuality. They are not easily pushed into anything, especially not into church-going. When they come to Dignity, they are already trekking beyond motivation by guilt or social pressure; they are seeking support to continue a spiritual journey.

They come because they seek God's love and reassurance. They want to feel that they are good and worthwhile, people of dignity. They do not come particularly seeking forgiveness or healing. Their motivation is much more basically religious. They have a deep experience of personal insufficiency. They feel there is more to life than they have been allowing. They seek God, salvation, new life.

Besides, they seek a community that will support them precisely in being themselves—religious *and* gay. Other churches would not understand. Other churches would require that they hide their true selves. These people want to stand before God and themselves as they really are. And being so thoroughly Catholic, they realize they cannot do this unless they stand before others, the Christian community, in all honesty. Together they express thankfulness to God. They speak of experiencing a sense of being blessed, of knowing a new-found worth, freedom and joy, of feeling unburdened after—in some cases—years of suffering oppression, hatred and self-denigration.

Of course, the picture is not universally positive. As in all church groups, some come to Dignity seeking merely social or even sexual

contacts. These are usually disappointed. They do not become regular attendants. The principal driving power behind every Dignity chapter known to this author is spiritual.

A community of mature faith

The seasoned members of Dignity are people who have by God's grace found God for themselves. They are no longer professing what their parents, teachers, priests, relatives or friends told them. What they profess is their own, learned through a long and difficult life's journey. The spirituality in question here fits the criteria of advanced maturity used by contemporary developmental theorists such as Lawrence Kohlberg, James Fowler and Jane Loevinger.

Needless to say, what is being described here is the ideal. Many come to Dignity to be told what to do. Kicking and screaming, they may fight for years to arrive at adult faith. Yet, here is the point: unlike many other church groups and probably atypical of Catholicism in general, the Dignity community encourages that struggle. The deeply personal focus of the community requires that people arrive at their own position. No one can give gay or lesbian people ecclesiastical or societal approval to be themselves. With the help of the Dignity community, they must arrive at this stance as their own.

Such adult faith entails a rediscovery of the meaning of the Gospel—*Good News*. Application of the Gospel to the concrete context of gay lives challenges typical interpretations. Gay Catholics must find a deeper meaning in religious formulas. For example, when they pray Psalm 119 and say, 'O Lord, I love your law,' they understand this to mean, 'I love your plan for me; I am glad to be who I am; I submit to your design for me as a gay person.' And they have to deprogram the other meaning, 'I obey what others impose on me as your will.' Or again, 'I am sorry for my sin' means 'I am sorry for betraying myself, for despairing over my homosexuality, for resisting your plan for me.' It does not necessarily mean, 'I am sorry for developing loving relationships in my life' or 'I am sorry for my parents' disappointment over me' or 'I am sorry for being different from others.' In Dignity one's homosexuality becomes the occasion for experiencing God's inscrutable yet loving Providence. The faith that results is that of adults.

A Conversion Community

The Dignity chapters form and grow because their members have conversion experiences. These people emerge from the cocoon of childhood's religious upbringing and rise in the freedom of adult faith, knowing that God made them and loves them as they are.

Such conversion touches different categories of people. Some few are Roman Catholics for whom religion was always important but who

hid their homosexuality. When they finally begin to deal with it, they need a religiously supportive community, so they come to Dignity. Quite a number of current or former priests, religious, and seminarians fall into this category.

But the majority of Dignity members are Roman Catholics who gave up their religion when they decided to accept their homosexuality. The belief that one must choose between being religious or being gay is all too prevalent. Unable to deny their homosexuality, many reject their religion. Then, when they realize that the dichotomy must be false, they come to Dignity.

Finally, many non-Catholics come to Dignity seeking a profoundly spiritual gay community. The Roman Catholic tradition fosters such community and attracts spiritually sensitive people. Typical of many contemporary church experiences, the Dignity experience has an ecumenical dimension.

This conversion community grows by inviting others to the same conversion: realize that God loves you as you are; you do not have to stop being religious—or even Catholic—just because you are homosexual. So Dignity chapters become involved in a major contemporary Catholic work: evangelization. The message spreads mostly by word of mouth and personal testimony. But brochures, business cards, ads in the gay press, posters in the bars, and interviews with the media also help spread the word. Friends invite their gay friends to come and see what this 'gay church' is like.

The whole process requires much patience. People who approach Dignity come and go. Apart from the sustaining core, selflessly committed to intense ministry, the typical Dignity congregation may be quite fluid. It takes years before many homosexual people shake off their ingrained sense of guilt and unworthiness and begin to experience God's love for them. 'Coming out' is a long and difficult process. Re-entry into church is frightening and difficult. People attend once, they do not return for months: the initial experience is overwhelming. Coming to Dignity is a complex affair. It does not mean simply coming back to church and being a standard legitimate Catholic again. It requires a rethinking of one's personal life and a new understanding of church. It requires some kind of religious conversion.

A Prophetic Community

Dignity challenges everyone. On the one hand, as gay it challenges standard Roman Catholics to rethink their attitudes toward their lesbian sisters and gay brothers and to openly welcome them into the church. It also challenges the churches by urging very disturbing ethical issues.

On the other hand, Dignity also challenges the gay subculture to face questions of sexual ethics and other spiritual issues. The gay

subculture tends to be adamantly anti-religious. Since the churches have generally abdicated responsibility for the gay community, sexual mores there often embody the worst of today's confused and perverted sexual values. That community does not want to hear from any moralizing religious do-gooders. Moreover, well aware that church groups are a most powerful opponent of their basic civil rights, most gay people harbour an intense distrust and animosity toward religion—and rightly so. Confusing civil rights with sexual ethics, here the Roman Catholic Church is certainly guilty, as the recent Vatican document makes abundantly clear. So Dignity, both gay and Catholic, is an affront to the gay subculture as well as to the church.

Dignity as church is not and cannot be any form of 'established religion'. It is rather a church of the *diaspora*, a church in exile, and in a most radical way. Dignity is ostracized both from the churches, from society at large, and from the gay community. It functions as a prophet, a lone voice crying in the wilderness of misunderstanding and opposition on all fronts. In this case it exhibits a sure sign of true biblical religion.

Yet not all Dignity members or chapters are willing to accept the prophetic call. They are not yet ready to be martyrs. So Dignity also runs the risk of becoming another closet. Providing the spiritual support that gay people need for their personal lives, it can serve as a cosy hideaway from responsibility for the broader ecclesial, civil, and gay communities. Not all Dignity members feel called to heroic sanctity.

A Welcoming Community

Being homosexual has a certain levelling effect. Once one has crossed the horrid barrier of that taboo, other societal categories become insignificant. So gay people can generally be proud that their community accepts people regardless of social class, educational background, economic status, and race. Tolerance within the gay community is relatively high. But the gay community also has its own hierarchy of acceptability. Youth rank high, and the elderly low. Good looks at any age are prized. Besides, there are the supposed dregs of gay society: swish, fluff, fems, bulldykes, drag queens, hustlers, transsexuals, addicts. Every society has its outcasts, even a society of outcasts.

As church in this society, Dignity is a welcoming community. Some chapters have an explicit policy of hospitality: we who have experienced rejection can hardly reject others; we who are accepted by God must accept all others. So the chapters struggle to make room for everyone. The high level of tolerance sometimes even inhibits the smooth running of the organization. But hospitality holds a higher priority than efficiency. Gospel values override secular values.

An Open and Honest Community

The Dignity communities are generally small, and their purpose is known to everyone. Whoever comes to Dignity meetings exposes himself or herself to association with society's lepers. Then there is nothing more to hide. So Dignity people know each other. They can talk freely about their lives—about their dreams and hardships, their loves and heartaches, their families, work, and friends. And they will be received and supported. This is true not only for those who have come to know each other as intimate friends but also for people who newly join the group. Table conversation after a Dignity liturgy can cover the whole gamut of human experience, and all is accepted and lovingly received. Humour is not lacking.

Here is a basis for real community. People do not have to hide from one another. Is such basis available in standard church communities, proper and 'respectable'? Is it available in formal religious communities, beset with their rules and taboos and traditions? Dignity offers people a place where they can be who they are and grow spiritually by sharing their life's journey with fellow believers. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous say the same about their meetings.

A Community of Equals

Because of the community's openness and because of the stigma of homosexuality, no one in the Dignity community can pretend to be above anyone else. When all are convicted, all are equals. Moreover, gay people have seen enough of life to see through most of it. Pretences are hard to sustain in a gay community. So in Dignity people meet and accept each other as equals, as fellow human beings. Whatever other respect one may have in the community must be earned.

The experience of priests presiding at Dignity liturgies offers an important example. Priests tend to call up a presbyteral poise and a liturgical lilt of the voice when they slip into their albs and chasubles. Such show falls flat in the gay community. So priests often report being nervous before the Dignity community. They know they cannot bluff their way with pious words and learned gestures. They feel the community sees through them. So, if they continue to preside at Dignity liturgies, they gradually learn to be themselves. Then they find themselves much more effective ministers, too.

The Dignity gathering tends to be a community of brothers and sisters. There is certainly an appropriate diversity of roles, and there may be sibling rivalry, but no one will pretend to play the parent. It would not work. Even from a structural point of view, Dignity fosters equality among its members. Dignity is lay organized and lay run. Even if the chapter is lucky enough to have a priest around regularly, the leader of the community is its elected president, not the priest. The priest is the

spiritual leader, the chaplain. Other than that, he is just one of the members whose voice is respected because of what he says, not because of his priestly role. Here Church is truly a People of God, a community of brothers and sisters working together, each contributing as each is able, all respected for their dignity before God.

This collegial role of the chaplain in the Dignity organization benefits both the chapter and official Catholicism. On the one hand, since Dignity is a lay organization, its activities and policies are free from clerical control. On the other hand, since the official church is not responsible for Dignity, bishops can use the local chapters as effective contact points for needed ministry to the gay community without thereby endorsing everything that Dignity does. The obvious parallel example is chaplaincy to the military establishment.

The Parish Community

The ultimate goal of Dignity chapters as separate local church communities is to become obsolete. The goal is to reintroduce alienated lesbian and gay Catholics into the Church and eventually to make them welcome to participate in ordinary parishes with respect and dignity. But that goal is still a long way off. In the meantime, the list of activities of an active Dignity chapter reads like that of an ordinary parish. In addition to providing regular liturgies and celebration of Reconciliation, Dignity leaders find themselves instructing converts, blessing homes, visiting the sick, burying the dead, writing testimonial letters for sacramental sponsors, counselling, holding socials and fundraisers, providing educational programs, organizing charitable works, making contributions to special causes, collaborating with other religious groups, and much more. The point is that even judging on externals Dignity provides a typical experience of church.

Those who insist on the ideal, that there should be no separate communities, that such groups are divisive to the church, need to remember that without such groups gay and lesbian Catholics would be effectively excluded from the church. More gross division, based on prejudice, would reign. Besides, in other cases the church never hesitates to establish special communities, like deaf communities or ethnic parishes, for people who have particular needs or who are not yet integrated into the church and society at large.

DIGNITY as Church

Formerly ecclesiology understood church by analysing its essence as the perfect society or as the Mystical Body of Christ. Today theologians prefer to focus on the mission of the church as a Pilgrim People. In *Church: The Continuing Quest* Richard McBrien outlined three functions constitutive of church. To these a fourth may be added.

Church is *koinonia*, a community of believers who support one another in faith and love and so become a model of hope to others. Church is *diakonia*, service to the world in preparation for the coming of God's reign. Church entails *kerygma*, proclamation of the Good News of God's love and acceptance and of our new life in Jesus Christ. And Church is *eucharistia*, thanksgiving and praise to God in the name of all creation.

As obvious centres of Christian *koinonia*, *diakonia*, *kerygma*, and *eucharistia*, Dignity chapters qualify as genuine local churches. They offer an otherwise neglected group of Catholics an alternative experience of Christ's on-going saving work in the world. They provide thousands of lesbian and gay people a rich experience of church. Some may still question whether all this sufficient for qualification also as a *Catholic* experience of church. If the answer is No, anyone with extensive pastoral experience might well wonder how any real parish could qualify.