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DIGNITY: THE ORGANIZATION

by
Diane R. Pawlowski

A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the
Department of Religious Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1990



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ABSTRACT

This study examines Dignity, a voluntary organization comprised of gay and lesbian Roman Catholics, and their friends. The research project asks how Dignity can survive in the face of hostility from the Church hierarchy. This opposition has been expressed by the 1986 Vatican document, "Letter to the Bishops of the World on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," and in the resulting expulsion of twenty-seven local Dignity chapters from their home parishes.

This project asks how Dignity can survive in the face of such intimidation and oppression. A review of works by specialists in gay and lesbian psychotherapy and religious issues, as well as a broad range of Dignity publications and personal documents revealed that members find, in Dignity, acceptance, a sense of community and even of family. Personal interviews with Dignity members confirmed these findings as members told how Dignity helped in the coming out process, met their spiritual needs, and served as a source of friendship and support. Additional interviews with those who minister to Dignity -- a bishop, priests, and members of religious orders -- provided additional

evidence that Dignity meets its members' needs. The interviews establish two facts. First, many work with Dignity because they believe that Dignity is of great value to its members. Secondly, Dignity provides affirmation, profound experiences of the presence of God and Christ, and personal support to the ministers themselves.

Dignity's position on sexual ethics places it in opposition to traditional Church teaching. This study discusses Dignity's position on sexual ethics, examining Dignity documents and position papers, including its Statement of Position and Purpose, and the Dignity Sexual Ethics Task Force, comparing them to related Church documents. In addition, respondents' views on sexual ethics are presented. The personal interviews show that the research project respondents' sexual ethics are in harmony with the position of the national organization.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the men and women of Dignity who have enriched my life beyond measure, and to whom I owe so much happiness, peace and joy. Special thanks to: Dan, Peter and Lee, Carlos and Brad, Jan, Doug and Jeff, Vanessa and Chris, John, Peter, and Mary Ann.

During the long days and nights of writing, the spirits of my four children sustained me. I also dedicate this work to them, and wish them well in their academic careers: Karen Marie, Christopher Kevin, Catherine Lorraine, and Marcy Jean.

I would also like to dedicate this work to FXC, a mentor who, even in the darkest hours, always served as a link to the concrete reality of Christ's love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank those who helped me complete this project. Without Dr. George Crowell's patient encouragement and editorial excellence, this project would have surely died. Dr. Barry Adam spent a great deal of time helping me sort out methodological problems and the experience of doing field work. With Dr. Adam's guidance, I learned to fully appreciate the beauty and joy of gay and lesbian culture. I would also like to thank Dr. Roy Amore for serving on my committee.

This project owes its very life to the men and women of Dignity, and those who minister to them. They freely and unselfconsciously gave of their thoughts and secrets, their joys and fears, their dreams and nightmares. They tolerated the presence of this researcher for fifty-two weeks of meetings, liturgies, extended Eucharists, and rides across the Canadian border -- where their brothers and sisters in Dignity/Canada/Dignite and the Canadian Gay Archives helped me find many rare documents and publications tracing Dignity's early history.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Dignity is a thriving, twenty-year-old organization for gay and lesbian Roman Catholics, their friends, and families. It exists within a religion with a recognized, centuries-old tradition of spiritual oppression that condemns gay and lesbian persons for physically expressing their love for one another. Individual Catholic bishops and priests have, nevertheless, on occasion, publicly praised and defended Dignity's ministry to the gay and lesbian community.

Dignity consists of more than 100 highly autonomous, chartered chapters geographically grouped in several regions across the U.S. The chapters are linked to the national organization, incorporated under the names of Dignity, Inc. and Dignity/USA, and headquartered in a small office in Washington, D.C. The national group and many local chapters hold tax-exempt status. The national, regional, and local arms of Dignity share fixed percentages of members' dues. The national organization publishes a newsletter and sponsors a biennial convention and house of delegates (HOD) meeting. Regional HOD meetings are held more frequently, and are hosted on a rotating basis by the local chapters and attended by the officers of local chapters and elected delegates. Locally, individual chapters sponsor an array of liturgies, educational, and social events that reflect individual chapters' needs and resources.

Dignity/USA defines itself in its Statement of Position and Purpose as an organization committed to "...develop leadership and to be an instrument through which the gay and lesbian Catholic may be heard by the

Church and Society."¹ This Statement of Position and Purpose is incorporated in each local chapter's constitution. It stresses Dignity members' belief in the beauty of God's creation, Christ's redemptive role in a Spirit-blessed Church, and the legitimate place lesbian women and gay men occupy in God's orderly universe. Acknowledging its members' responsibilities to the Church, society at large, and other gay and lesbian people in particular, Dignity assists its members in areas of spiritual development, education, social justice, feminist issues, and interpersonal relationships.²

Dignity also helps its members strive to meet ethical ideals in their sexual relationships by promoting the philosophy that "...gays and lesbians can express their sexuality in a manner consonant with Christ's teachings."³ In 1989, the San Francisco HOD amended the Statement of Position and Purpose to indicate a belief in the morality of same-sex genital

¹ Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, undated.

² Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, (undated) prior to 1987.

³ Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, undated.

activity."⁴ This amendment came in response to a document promulgated by Rome three years earlier.

In October 1986, the Vatican issued the "Letter to the Bishops of the World on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," also known as the Ratzinger Letter. Prior to the release of the Ratzinger Letter, most ordinaries tolerated Dignity's presence. Some bishops even welcomed Dignity because it provided a much needed and effective ministerial outreach to the gay and lesbian community. Bishops critical of Dignity usually overlooked the chapters under their jurisdiction as long as Dignity members maintained a low profile. As long as the various chapters appeared, in interviews or in correspondence, to adhere to traditional Catholic theology, no action was taken against them. However, the Ratzinger Letter specifically forbade support -- including the use of Church buildings -- for groups seeking change in Church teaching.⁵ Consequently, many ordinaries expelled Dignity chapters from Church property. Others forbade priests to celebrate the ritual central to all Catholic

⁴ Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, 1989.

⁵ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops," #17.

communities -- the Mass -- for Dignity chapters.⁶

Still, Dignity survived. The actions by the Vatican and the hierarchy, however, placed the organization in a crisis that threatened Dignity's identity as a Catholic organization. Dignity's own mandate has been to unite gay and lesbian Catholics and to "...encourage their full participation in the life of the Church...."⁷ If Dignity relinquishes its allegiance to the Church, Dignity also surrenders a principal facet of its identity, and one of the two binding forces that link members: commonality of religious belief⁸ and sexual orientation.

In order to maintain its identity in the wake of the Ratzinger Letter, Dignity has had to resist the

⁶ Archdiocese of Chicago, "Statement of the Archdiocese of Chicago Regarding Dignity Sponsored Mass at Resurrection Lutheran Church," 6 June 1988; Atlanta, GA Archbishop Thomas A. Donnellan, letter to diocesan priests, 5 January 1987; Los Angeles Archbishop Roger Mahoney et al., letter to priests of the archdiocese, 14 June 1989; Diocese of San Diego, CA, news release, 23 June 1989.

⁷ Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, undated, #1, #3.

⁸ For some members, commonality of religious belief may not be crucial because some non-Catholics do belong to Dignity and, in some chapters, are elected as officers. Some members have formed joint Dignity - Integrity chapters in an attempt to provide the gay and lesbian community with greater solidarity.

Vatican's attempts to discredit and destroy it as a viable organization. Nevertheless, Dignity stands before Rome, quietly and firmly refusing to back down, insisting instead on its identity as a legitimate organization within the Church.

Research Questions.

Primarily, this research project asks how Dignity as an organization survives in the face of intimidation from the very institution to which it turns for acceptance and affirmation. Given the hostility Dignity faces from so many members of the Catholic hierarchy, how does Dignity attract and hold its members while asserting its right to a place within the Church? What are the sources of its strength that enable it to flourish and to celebrate the lives of its gay and lesbian members while affirming its Catholic identity?

The first of this study's four sections consists of the present introductory chapter and a second chapter that briefly traces the history of Dignity/USA and the three local chapters included in this study. Chapter II begins to answer the study questions as it presents historical background information needed to understand the Dignity experience as lived by the

members. The second section of this study examines the extent to which Dignity meets the needs of its members, exploring Dignity's internal dynamics, and the ways in which Dignity members relate to each other. Dignity's weaknesses, as well as its strengths, are discussed.

Chapter III examines the published sources including books, newspapers, magazine and newspaper articles, along with some autobiographical material drawn from Dignity's local, regional and national newsletters. This chapter compares the experiences of gay and lesbian Catholics in their local parishes with their experiences in Dignity, as it illustrates how Dignity meets the needs of its members.

The research then turns, in Chapter IV, to interviews with individual members to find out how Dignity affects their lives. Information revealing individuals' perceptions of Dignity's effects on their lives can only be obtained by examining Dignity at the grassroots -- the local chapter -- level. It is, after all, the individual members and participants who bring life and meaning to any organization. This portion of the study focuses on the Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Toledo chapters. It employs a combined participant observation and open-ended interview methodology that

is described in detail in the Appendix. Interview participants included twenty-five male and female Dignity members and officers.

In order to verify members' impressions of Dignity's impact on their lives, the study drew on the expertise of six priests and members of religious orders. These participants are identified as chaplains. In addition a regional bishop, who serves an area where a major Dignity chapter is located, granted interviews for this study. Chapter V presents the results of these interviews. The Appendix contains a description of the methodology utilized in this portion of the study.

In addition, information drawn from a qualitative survey conducted by the Dignity/Detroit executive council was used to supplement the interview material, and is included in Chapter VI. This survey was mailed to all individuals on the Detroit chapter's mailing list residing in the state of Michigan. Chaplains, supporters, members, and non-members who attend its functions received the survey. Dignity/Detroit distributed the survey at a number of liturgies in an attempt to reach those not on the mailing list. Thus, this chapter provides further information from a wider

range of sources that illustrates the influence Dignity has on its members.

Chapter VII provides a description of routine events and rituals in the collective life of the Detroit and Ann Arbor chapters. It presents additional information on members' interactions at some of the more meaningful events that occurred during the course of one year's time of participant observation.

The third section discusses Dignity's struggle to develop a sexual ethic, an issue that lies at the root of its disagreements with Church hierarchy. If Dignity chooses to stay within the Church, and retain its Catholic identity, as a group it must settle its differences on sexual ethics with the Church hierarchy. In recent years priests, scholars, and theologians who were acting individually failed to persuade the Church hierarchy to reappraise its sexual ethics as Vatican oppression and censorship stifled dissent.

Chapter VIII describes Dignity/USA's evolving sexual ethics through an examination of its Statement of Position and Purpose, Dignity publications, and other Dignity documents, including its most recent document, a report by Dignity's Task Force on Sexual Ethics. Chapter IX draws on the interviews with

members and chaplains to document the way in which some members have come to terms with the Church's stand on sexual ethics. Although this was not the intent of the study, the interviews do seem to validate the Task Force report. Dignity's stand on sexual ethics is significant because it is based on the documented, lived experience of a large group of gay and lesbian people who are struggling to lead moral lives. It provides the Church with evidence and argumentation that Dignity hopes can be used as the basis for reevaluating the Church's present stand on sexual ethics.

CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Dignity's very existence is of historic importance to the Roman Catholic Church. According to theologian and psychotherapist John J. McNeill:

This is the first time in two thousand years of Christian history that there has been a Christian gay community in which we can publicly seek each other's support in an effort to integrate our spiritual lives with our sexuality.¹

Gearhart and Johnson concur with McNeill, adding that Dignity is significant because it is the first gay

¹ John J. McNeill, Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians and Their Lovers, Families and Friends (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 181.

and lesbian organization to operate within the structure of a specific religious tradition. The earlier work of the Protestant minister, Rev. Troy Perry resulted in the formation, in 1968, of the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). Perry founded MCC specifically to address the unmet spiritual needs of the gay and lesbian community.²² MCC has spread throughout the gay and lesbian community in many areas of the world, with a membership in excess of 20,000 persons.²³ Many Catholics join MCC congregations when they decide to leave the Catholic Church because of its teachings on homosexuality. Since Dignity's founding, additional groups have sprung up to serve gay and lesbian adherents to almost every known Western faith tradition.

As early as 1974, Gearhart and Johnson suggested that Dignity would play an increasingly active role, eventually functioning as the voice for the gay and

²² Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward, Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality Updated ed., (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979; Second Harvest / HBJ ed., 1989), 176.

²³ Richard Woods, Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality, 3rd ed. (Ft. Wayne, IN: Knoll, 1988), 117.

lesbian movement within the Roman Church."⁴ Gearhart and Johnson's predictions have been proven correct, especially in light of the work of the Sexual Ethics Task Force.

According to Killian, Dignity began in 1969 when an Augustinian priest, Fr. Pat Nidorf, placed advertisements in several gay publications seeking gay Catholics who were interested in forming a support group.⁵ A growing involvement by Protestant clergy in ministry to the gay community, that contrasted markedly with Catholic inertia, prodded Nidorf into action.⁶ The ads resulted in the formation of a psychotherapy and discussion support group that met alternately in San Diego and Los Angeles. Unlike Dignity's present policy of open acceptance, this article states that the founder asked the first potential members to meet an age requirement (twenty-one) and to complete a lengthy

⁴ Sally Gearhart and Bill Johnson, "The Gay Movement in the Church," chap. in Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation and the Church (San Francisco, CA: Glide Publications, 1974), 67.

⁵ In correspondence with the author dated 23 September 1989, Nidorf stated that he legally changed his given name from 'Patrick X. Nidorf' to 'Pax Nidorf.'

⁶ Killian, untitled, (Dignity/USA), undated; Pax Nidorf, correspondence with author, 25 August 1989.

questionnaire before joining.⁷ The anonymous article states that its founder named the group 'Dignity' because "...one of our basic goals was to bring dignity into the spiritual and social lives of some very special people."⁸

On the East Coast, more than one hundred gay Catholics responded to ads in The Village Voice placed by McNeill, Dignity/New York's co-founder. McNeill had become intensely aware of the lack of Catholic ministry to gays and lesbians in that city. McNeill explains the rationale for founding the group:

What was the spirit of the founders of Dignity? We hoped against hope that somehow God would perhaps make us instruments in removing the Church's blindness of sexism and heterosexism. We hoped that by working together we could find a way to integrate our religious faith and our gayness in a way acceptable to God and our church without in any way suppressing or denying our gay and

⁷ There are several minor differences in the accounts of Dignity's founding as related by Killian, Nidorf, and the author of the anonymous article that is attributed to Dignity's priest-founder, which Nidorf denies having written. (Insight: Fall, 1987.) The differences revolve around the age requirement and the questionnaire, which Nidorf contends never existed, as well as the founding date. Using Nidorf's chronology, Dignity was founded a full year later than Dignity / USA's records indicate. All other details coincide.

⁸ Anonymous, "All Right -- Who Started It?," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion 2:1 (Fall 1987): 6.

lesbian reality.⁹

This differs somewhat from Nidorf's recollection of the goals he visualized for the fledgling organization. Nidorf states:

The primary purpose [of founding Dignity] was to get gay Catholics to dump their guilt trip about being gay and to help them feel spiritually comfortable in the Church. It was never my goal to seek acceptance from Church authorities. Being gay does not make someone special any more [sic] than being heterosexual does. One is special because one is in touch with their personal power and the God-light within them...I do not think Dignity is moving in this direction. I believe many chapters are obsessed with the idea of being accepted by Holy Mother. They are not OK just because someone else says they are -- they seem to have forgotten this. They are OK because they accept themselves as children of the Universe.¹⁰

The tension existing between Dignity members' desires to participate fully as gay and lesbian people in the Catholic Church, a concept which is supported by some priests' recognition of Dignity's benefits, and the hierarchical ambivalence and disapproval that would eventually result in the eviction of many chapters, became evident in the infant group's first encounter with the hierarchy in 1971. Dignity's newly elected

⁹ McNeill, Taking a Chance on God, 180.

¹⁰ Pax Nidorf, correspondence with author, 23 September 1989.

officers decided to write to local (California) pastors notifying them of a proposed Dignity outreach program. When the officers informed San Diego Archbishop Timothy Manning of their plans, Manning demanded a meeting with Nidorf. The meeting was attended by Manning, Nidorf, and Nidorf's religious superior. The anonymous author states:

Bishop Manning was offended that coming from another diocese I was working in his without his permission and thought that principles of Dignity were untenable. Gay was not OK. He kindly asked me to leave his diocese and I assured him that I would.¹¹

Nidorf, in correspondence, adds further details about this meeting that further illustrate the kind of problems that would consistently plague Dignity throughout its encounters with many members of the hierarchy. He states:

Manning impressed me as being very political, authoritarian, and homophobic. At my meeting with him, he did not say he was opposed to the principles of a gay Catholic group, only that he didn't want a priest working in his diocese who didn't belong there. Being an Augustinian and not a diocesan priest, this really didn't make any sense, but was just his way of saying 'desist.' My own provincial and the other Augustinians were very supportive of my work, though at that time, none were personally involved in this

¹¹ Anonymous, "All right," 6; Joseph Gilgamesh Killian, "Dignity: The Early Years" Dignity/USA Newsletter 21:4 (Summer, 1989), 1.

particular ministry.¹¹²

Apparently, Nidorf saw the developments with Manning as an opportunity to leave Dignity in the hands of its competent lay leaders. Nidorf left the diocese, and, subsequently, the priesthood.¹¹³

Dignity continued to grow under lay leadership while the involvement of helpful clergy and religious increased. Before the Ratzinger Letter's release, Dignity listed more than 5,000 members in more than 100 chapters in the U.S. alone. Officers estimated that another several thousand non-members and friends attended weekly liturgies and functions in various chapters in North America. In 1985, the Canadian region, once closely aligned with chapters in Alaska and on the U.S. west coast, amicably completed a preplanned separation from its U.S. counterpart. The new organization, known bilingually as Dignity/Canada/Dignite, contains twelve chapters. The two groups support each other by sending representatives to meetings and by reporting major events in their national newsletters.

¹¹² Pax Nidorf, correspondence with author, 23 September 1989.

¹¹³ Nidorf, correspondence with author, 25 August 1989.

Dignity/USA also maintains affiliations with gay Catholic groups in Australia (Acceptance), England (Quest), France (David et Jonathan), Sweden (Veritas), Spain (Dignitat), Korea (Brothers of Jonathan), and South America.¹⁴ However, this thesis concentrates on Dignity/USA by focusing on three chapters: the flourishing Detroit, the expelled Toledo, and recently disbanded Ann Arbor chapters.

Dignity's Relationship to the Roman Church.

A complete discussion of the origins and extent of the history of the Church's hostility toward gays and lesbians remains beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in The New Testament and Homosexuality,¹⁵ biblical scholar Robin Scroggs discusses the scriptural roots Scroggs feels are part of the evolution of the Christian prohibition against homosexuality. Scroggs explains cultural practices that elicited the Pauline statements Christian churches use to justify homophobia, hostility, discrimination and even persecution of homosexuals.

¹⁴ Tom Oddo and Paul Diederich, "An Overview," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion 2:1 (Fall 1987): 6; McNeill, Taking a Chance, 180.

¹⁵ Robin Scroggs, New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 5th printing, 1988.

In the ground breaking work, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality,¹⁶ John Boswell shows how the Church's attitude toward homosexuality changed from tolerance to intolerance in the period from the Greco-Roman era through the fourteenth century. In a more recent and more comprehensive work, The Construction of Homosexuality,¹⁷ David F. Greenberg points out the Church's actions against gays and lesbians in a cross-cultural examination of homosexuality that ranges from earliest history to recent developments in the gay liberation movement.

Dignity's sustained growth has occurred while Dignity endured an ambiguous, strained relationship with the Church. On the one hand, hostile proponents of Catholic orthodoxy in the hierarchy, clergy, and laity attempted to suppress gays and lesbians and any theologians (such as Curran, Kosnik, and McNeill) or clergy (such as Hunthausen, Nugent, Ginder¹⁸, and

¹⁶ John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹⁷ David F. Greenberg, The Construction of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁸ George De Stefano, "Punishing a Church Critic: The Case of Richard Ginder," The Advocate 439 (4 February 1986): 46.

Lynch¹⁹). These individuals either too openly attempted to advocate gay and lesbian rights, or too publicly sought changes in the Church's position on sexual ethics. On the other hand, Dignity documents -- from its founding to the 1989 San Francisco HOD -- contain a litany of priests, and female and male religious who have been actively involved with Dignity.

Prior to the Ratzinger Letter, many ordinaries allowed Dignity to meet openly on Church property. Most ordinaries permitted priests to celebrate Dignity's Masses. A few bishops wrote statements or pastoral letters fostering acceptance and understanding of gay and lesbian people²⁰. Archbishop Hunthausen welcomed the 1985 Dignity national convention's Mass in his Seattle cathedral by videotape, after issuing explanatory letters.²¹ However, in a 1985 letter to

¹⁹ Patricia Lefevere, "New York Dignity Priest Ordered to Rome," National Catholic Reporter, 16 October 1987, 5.

²⁰ George Dugan, "Bishop Mugavero of Brooklyn Backs Homosexual Rights," New York Times, 22 February 1976, 1(A), 8(A).

²¹ Raymond Hunthausen, "Letter to Priests and Rationale for Welcoming the National Dignity Convention to Seattle," 8 June 1983; and "Archbishop Addresses Issue of Homosexuality," in Homosexuality and the Magisterium: Documents from the Vatican and the U.S. Bishops 1975-1985, ed. John Gallagher (Mt. Rainier, MD: New Ways Ministry, 1983), 79-88.

Hunthausen reprinted in the National Catholic Reporter. Ratzinger cites this Dignity Mass as evidence of the doctrinal laxity that eventually resulted in the Vatican naming a newly consecrated bishop to serve as coadjutor of Hunthausen's diocese.¹²

More recently, the Vatican exhibited its hostility towards gays and lesbians in general, and Dignity in particular, when the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Order of the Inquisition) issued its "Letter to the Bishops of the World on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," also known as the Ratzinger Letter. The Ratzinger Letter, dated 1 October 1986, was promulgated on 30 October 1986. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation (CDF), signed it. In its closing paragraph, the Ratzinger Letter states that it received the personal approval of John Paul II. Although the Ratzinger Letter was not unexpected, its release precipitated a crisis for Dignity. Many perceived the Ratzinger Letter as a direct attack on Dignity and the theologians, priests, and religious who supported or

¹² Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Ratzinger '85 Letter Outlines Road to Orthodoxy," (reprint of letter sent to U.S. bishops by the U.S. bishops' commission) National Catholic Reporter, 5 June 1987, #14, 25.

endorsed Dignity.²³ The Ratzinger Letter's significance lies in the fact that it provides Catholic ordinaries with explicit pastoral directives for ministry to gay and lesbian individuals and groups. The Ratzinger Letter also attempts to abort any further debate on the theological and ethical questions surrounding the issue of homosexuality.

Also, in #17, the Ratzinger Letter orders bishops to withdraw all support from, and to ban from Church buildings any groups that disregard or seek to change Church teaching.²⁴ Consequently, ordinaries who had merely tolerated Dignity's presence on Church property up to this point, within weeks began using the Ratzinger Letter to oust more than two dozen chapters from the parishes or campus ministries they had called home for as long as sixteen years. The Ratzinger Letter is cited in ordinaries' letters that discuss banning Dignity chapters. This is the case in a letter dated 5 January 1987, signed by Archbishop T. A. Donnellan of Atlanta. Donnellan concludes that the

²³ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the World's Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," Origins: NC Documentary Service 16:22 (13 November, 1986), #17, #18; Jim Bussen, correspondence with author, 1989.

²⁴ CDF, "Letter to the Bishops," #17.

Ratzinger Letter applies to Dignity, and he uses this to justify evicting Dignity/Atlanta from its home parish. A similar situation, in which an ordinary banned a Dignity chapter without engaging in dialogue, occurred in New York City.²⁵

In some cases, the ranking ordinary simply ordered Dignity to leave Church property by a given date. In other chapters, such as Toledo, Cincinnati, Dayton, Cleveland, and Tampa Bay, some dialogue between ordinary and chapter occurred. Toledo faced a test of orthodoxy when Bishop James R. Hoffman, who has been described as "...far from a 'hard liner,' actually a very personable and pastoral man under more normal circumstances..." who would not ordinarily have acted against a Dignity group²⁶, asked the chapter to state that it agreed with a 1976 statement on sexual ethics issued by the National Council of Catholic Bishops.²⁷

²⁵ Archbishop Thomas A. Donnellan, correspondence with anonymous priest, 5 January 1987; Dignity/Queens, correspondence with author, 27 June 1989.

²⁶ Dignity/Toledo chaplain, correspondence with author, 20 September 1989.

²⁷ Dignity/Toledo Chaplain, correspondence with author, 16 June 1989; Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, correspondence with author, 7 August 1989; Sister Catherine Lee, correspondence with author, 26 July 1989; Dignity/Tampa Bay, correspondence with author, 4 June 1989.

Other religious denominations, including the Methodists, Episcopalians, and Unitarians have opened their doors to the ousted chapters.

In 1986, Dignity/USA reacted to the Ratzinger Letter with a flurry of press releases and statements. A number of other organizations, including the Catholic Coalition for Gay Civil Rights, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, New Ways Ministry, National Federation of Parents and Friends of Gays, and the National Coalition of American Nuns spoke out in support of Dignity in the days immediately following the Ratzinger Letter's release. During 1987 and 1988, at the local level, chapters attempted to hold discussions with their ordinaries. As chapters left their home parishes, they held memorial services and Exodus Masses. In New York, picketing and protesting inside St. Patrick's Cathedral led to arrests of Dignity members, and eventually, to a split between conservative and activist factions of the New York chapter. The rift between Dignity and the Church hierarchy widened even further when Dignity, in response to the Ratzinger Letter, amended its Statement of Position and Purpose at its 1987 Bal Harbor, Florida HOD. The amended statement expresses more explicitly

Dignity's belief in the morality of sexuality, as expressed in the context of gay and lesbian relationships. The two factions' differences became more pronounced during Dignity members' protests in San Francisco marking the 1987 Papal visit to the U.S.

Critics charge that the Detroit chapter has remained in its home parish because it refused to sponsor or participate in demonstrations that might have embarrassed the Pope. In fact, the chapter cancelled its plans for an alternative prayer vigil that was to be held at its home parish, Most Holy Trinity, when requested to do so by diocesan officials. Eventually, Dignity/Detroit's prayer service was tacked on to another service that was held at Central Methodist Church in downtown Detroit.²²⁸ From 1987 to 1988, a period of anger, turmoil and rejection following the Ratzinger Letter's release, Dignity lost several hundred members. Some who left said they did so because they felt that it was impossible, as gay or lesbian people, to remain within the Catholic Church.²²⁹ Nevertheless, Dignity's membership has now stabilized

²²⁸ Dignity member, correspondence, 8 August 1987; Interviews, Dignity/Detroit, 1989.

²²⁹ Members: Dignity/Ann Arbor; Dignity/Detroit; personal communications, 1986-1989.

at 4,700. The formation of new chapters has balanced the dissolution of a few others so that the number of chapters holds steady at more than 100. While some chapters struggle to maintain the minimal membership required to retain a charter, ironically, many of the ousted chapters, such as Toledo and San Francisco, boast membership gains.³⁰

In responding to the Ratzinger Letter, Dignity/USA's earlier posture of reconciliation and compromise shifted. In press releases issued in late 1986 and 1987, Dignity placed itself in a position to challenge and oppose Catholic teaching when Dignity redefined itself as working:

To encourage a sexual theology within the Church that will minister to all believers regardless of their sexual orientation. Dignity disagrees with the magisterial teaching of the Church concerning homosexuality.³¹

At the 1987 Bal Harbor, Florida HQD, representatives approved an updated version of the Statement of Position and Purpose, calling for a reexamination of the Roman Church's position on homosexuality. Dignity also issued a "Declaration of

³⁰ Dignity/USA, Newsletters, 1988-1989.

³¹ Dignity/USA, Press Releases, 1986-1987.

Non-Reception of the Pastoral Letter on the Care of Homosexual Persons." This statement formally rejected the Ratzinger Letter on the grounds that it is "...pastorally inadequate to meet...needs of American Gay and Lesbian Catholics, their families and friends." The Declaration refers to the Ratzinger Letter as a flawed "pastoral plan" that "...has neither considered its effects on those it seeks to reach, nor consulted those who possess expertise in reaching them."³²

Dignity/USA also placed a full-page ad in the 27 April 1987 issue of Newsweek magazine. The ad stated, in essence, that Christ said nothing to condemn homosexuality while the Ratzinger Letter has condemned homosexuality. The ad, which was originally rejected by Time, cost approximately \$25,000. A Michigan Catholic article discussing the advertisement quotes Archbishop May as stating that the Church could not accept Dignity as long as it adheres to the position, stated in the ad and in its Statement of Position and Purpose, "...that lesbian and gay Catholics...can express their sexuality in a manner that is responsible, loving and consonant with Christ's

³² Dignity/USA, "Declaration of Non-Reception," 23 July 1987.

message.³³

The Ratzinger Letter's impact continues to be felt. On 19 June 1989, the thirteen bishops governing the province of Los Angeles -- an area that encompasses San Diego -- forbade any secular or religious priest in the diocese to celebrate a Dignity Mass. The bishops chose to implement the ban "...because that group repudiates the moral teaching of the church regarding homosexual acts." The announcement stated that:

The church cannot recognize or in any way cooperate with Dignity, which often has identified itself as a Catholic organization, because of the organization's refusal to accept the church's teaching on human sexuality.³⁴

The California bishops' ban took effect two months before Dignity/USA's 1989 San Francisco HOD and convention was scheduled to open. The declaration may have been designed to intimidate delegates to the convention because statements issued by the Los Angeles archdiocese cite the resolution on sexual ethics adopted at Bal Harbor.³⁵ The tactic, if such it was,

³³ Jerry Filteau, "'Dignity' Ad in Newsweek Hits Church View of Gays," Michigan Catholic, 1 May 1987.

³⁴ Diocese of San Diego, News Release, 23 June 1989.

³⁵ Archbishop Roger Mahoney et al. correspondence with priests in Province of Los Angeles, 14 July 1989.

failed. Instead, the HOD approved an amendment to the national Statement of Position and Purpose which states Dignity's belief that gays and lesbians can "...express our sexuality physically in a unitive manner that is loving, life-giving and life-affirming."³⁶ This statement can be interpreted as placing Dignity in direct opposition to Church teaching which condemns any physical sexual activity for homosexuals. On the other hand, the statement closely follows, and quotes from, the theology outlined by Kosnik et al. in the controversial study commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society.³⁷

Nevertheless, the pastoral involvement of committed and supportive priests and vowed men and women religious acting within the Church continues. Woods estimates that more than a thousand such individuals maintain a working relationship with

³⁶ Dignity/USA, Amendment, August 1989.

³⁷ Anthony Kosnik and others, Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought (New York: Paulist, 1977), 209-218; Dignity/USA Task Force on Sexual Ethics, "Sexual Ethics: Experience, Growth, Challenge," 12.

Dignity in various capacities.³⁹ Some clerics are encountering increased pressure, and sometimes orders, to distance themselves from Dignity. Those who continue to speak publicly, to celebrate Mass, or to serve as pastoral ministers, spiritual directors, or chaplains in some dioceses do so risking censure, disciplinary action, and even "loss of faculties" -- the right to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments -- and the end of a ministerial career. This involvement indicates a qualified pastoral approval of Dignity's efficacy in addressing gays' and lesbians' many complex ethical conflicts and meeting their unique needs.

History of Detroit, Ann Arbor and Toledo Chapters.

In order to place this research in perspective, it is useful to examine the history of the chapters involved in this project. The history of the Detroit chapter, the fourth largest chapter in the U.S. and the largest in its four-state area of Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky that comprises Region V, illustrates the tension and hostility Dignity chapters cope with while enjoying priests' and nuns' pastoral support.

³⁹ Richard Woods, Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality, 3rd ed., (Fort Wayne, IN: Knoll, 1988), 116.

While some of the former national officers describe the Detroit chapter as a conservative aberration,³⁹ Dignity/Detroit boasts a pattern of steady growth over the years. More importantly, Dignity/Detroit enjoys open access to Church property, and it has become integrated into the diocesan and parish structures. On the other hand, some ordinaries have criticized some Dignity chapters for fostering the isolation of its members into what these critics describe as 'gay ghettos.'⁴⁰

On 11 May 1974, the first Dignity Centre in the U.S., located at 2846 17th Street, near downtown Detroit opened its doors. The first meeting was attended by a priest and six lay men, including Brian McNaught, a staff writer and columnist for the Detroit diocesan paper, The Michigan Catholic.⁴¹ Before his election as first president of the Detroit chapter on 19 June 1974, McNaught, who had written a column titled, "Gay or Straight, Love is the Goal," revealed

³⁹ Two officers, Dignity/USA, members, personal communications, August, 1989.

⁴⁰ Archbishop Walter F. Sullivan, correspondence with author, 31 July 1989; Robert T. Kerr, interview with author, 25 May 1989.

⁴¹ Anonymous, Dignity/Detroit: An Informal History, undated, 1-2.

his sexual orientation to each member of The Michigan Catholic editorial staff in a series of luncheon meetings.⁴²

On 8 July 1974, the first working day after an interview article appeared in The Detroit News explaining McNaught's involvement with Dignity/Detroit, The Michigan Catholic dropped McNaught's column. After a protest against the paper and a hunger strike attracted national media attention, McNaught was fired.⁴³

In response to this event, Representatives of Dignity/USA, and the Salvatorian Gay Ministry Task Force, co-sponsors of a national conference on gay and lesbian ministry scheduled to run in Detroit from 30 August to 2 September 1974, began working with the Newspaper Guild, volunteer attorneys, activists, and friends from Detroit and Ann Arbor to plan a Labour Day Mass of Solidarity at Dignity/Detroit's host parish, Most Holy Trinity. More than 200 priests, religious, and laity from all over the U.S. attended the concelebrated Mass and subsequent march to the

⁴² Anonymous, An Informal History, 2-3.

⁴³ Ibid., 2.

Chancery.**

Two weeks later, McNaught began a water "fast of reparation" for the Church's sins committed against gay and lesbian people over the centuries. McNaught's explanatory public statement, directed at the local ordinaries in a call for a commitment for education of clergy and laity, reads in part:

My love for my Church and my love for my gay sisters and brothers are in conflict...My Church has sinned grievously. My Church indicates her desire to continue her grievous sin....There is no greater perpetrator of unjust oppression against the gay community in the history of man on the face of this earth, than my Church. While lip service is given to the need to protect all persons' civil rights, my church leads the battle against laws which would ensure equal opportunities in jobs and housing....In the face of modern psychiatric thought...my Church boldly proclaims my gay brothers and sisters are mentally ill. Therefore, at the feet of my Church I lay the guilt of countless suicides, the number one cause of death of young gays. I lay the phenomenal bill for the psychiatric counselling which was necessitated not by the homosexual orientation but by my Church's insistence that the homosexual was mentally and morally sick. At the feet of my Church I lay the pain of twisted minds which have been trained to hate themselves because they were told they were unnatural and that their natural drives were disgusting in the eyes of God. I lay the tears of millions of parents who have been told that their child's orientation was their fault for

** Dignity/USA, Press Release, 16 September 1974; Anonymous, An Informal History, 1-5.

being over-protective or absent."⁴⁵

Twenty-four days and twenty-two pounds later, McNaught ended his fast when two of Detroit's auxiliary bishops, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton and Bishop Joseph Imesch wrote, "We have a serious obligation to root out those structures and attitudes which discriminate against homosexuals as persons."⁴⁶

However, McNaught later charged that the bishops claimed they acted only to end the fast. Four years later, McNaught observed that official statements by individuals are easily made -- and just as easily retracted, writing:

They [the bishops] made that statement to end my water fast and yet, not only did they remain silent when I was fired by The Michigan Catholic the next day, but they later reportedly claimed they were forced into signing the statement and objected to it being used in any national gay rights literature. So much for 'serious obligation.'⁴⁷

Nevertheless Dignity/Detroit remains at Most Holy

⁴⁵ Brian McNaught, "Statement of Brian McNaught Proclaiming His Fast," Press Release, Dignity / USA, 16 September 1974, unpaginated.

⁴⁶ Nancy Manser, "Dearden Firm on Homosexual Stand," The Detroit News, 21 August 1974, 7(B), 5(B); Brian McNaught, "Brian's Column," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion (Summer 1978): 4.

⁴⁷ McNaught, "Brian's Column," 4.

Trinity Parish, its 200 members helping with the physical and financial maintenance of a parish that counts only about 300 families on its rolls. For example, each year, Dignity/Detroit helps Holy Trinity meet the archdiocese's assessment demands for funds during its annual fund-raising appeal. Dignity members clean and decorate the church building as needed. Unlike most chapters, Dignity advertises its Sunday Mass as a parish Mass, augmenting Trinity's own weekend Mass schedule, which has been curtailed from six to three liturgies. Because Dignity contacts priests for this Mass from its own list of volunteer celebrants, plans its liturgies, and uses its members as lectors and Eucharistic ministers, this aids this tiny parish as it copes with recent, severe staff cutbacks.

Dignity/Ann Arbor, which voted to dissolve and to return its charter to the region on 24 September 1989, provided a contrast to Detroit in its size, demographics, and in its relationship with its parish and with its ordinary. In June of 1981, Dignity/Ann Arbor became the ninety-seventh chapter in the U.S. to receive a charter. At its peak, in 1986, the chapter listed forty members, with between twenty and thirty attending Masses and meetings during this period. Its

membership dwindled to approximately one dozen by 1988, with meetings attended by an approximately equal number of men and women.

The Ann Arbor chapter stopped meeting at its home parish during the summer of 1989. Officers attempted to honour the members' wishes to return their meeting and Mass to Sunday evenings. (For about two years, Mass and meetings were scheduled for Thursday evenings.) However, a dispute with the pastor concerning meeting and Mass nights, plus a lack of privacy for a meeting space compelled the group to meet at officers' homes. When the chapter hosted the meeting of the five-state Region V HOD in July 1989, all events were scheduled for it by the Episcopal group Integrity at meeting rooms in the University of Michigan Student Union and the worship space at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Integrity's home parish. The chapter returned its charter to the Regional HOD when it met in Detroit in October 1989.

The Ann Arbor chapter's ordinary, Bishop Kenneth Povish, expressing concern about Dignity that may be representative of other ordinaries' opinions, states:

In May of 1976 I gave my endorsement to Dignity of Flint after a meeting with leadership...and a representative of the area clergy....Eventually, Dignity came out boldly

in defense of the homosexual lifestyle and the Vatican also came out clearly with the distinction between homosexual orientation (accepted) and homosexual activity (forbidden). I withdrew my public support of Dignity at that time....Since the hardening of both the Dignity and the Vatican positions, I think it can be said that at best I have tolerated the two remaining groups.⁴⁸

Dignity/Toledo's history illustrates the effect Dignity's stand on sexual ethics has on a chapter's relationship with the Church and serves as an example of one of the processes that was used to evict chapters. A new pastor, the former Chancellor of the diocese of Toledo, was assigned to the Toledo chapter's home parish, St. Francis de Sales. When the parish council asked if they were required to act on the Ratzinger Letter, this new pastor questioned Toledo's ordinary, Bishop James R. Hoffman. According to the Dignity/Toledo chaplain, the bishop was legally required to respond to the parish council's question. Correspondence between Hoffman and the chapter leadership began with a letter dated 23 July 1987.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Bishop Kenneth Povish, correspondence with the author, 14 August 1989.

⁴⁹ Dignity/Toledo chaplain, correspondence with author, 11 July 1989; Bishop James R. Hoffman, correspondence with Dignity/Toledo leadership, 23 July 1987.

The chaplain states:

We [the chapter] had discussed leaving on our own and did investigate possible new sites in preparation for this decision. But finally the [chapter's] Board [of elected officers] and members decided to force Hoffman to make the decision and take responsibility for it.⁵⁰

In the months that followed, the membership held discussions and debates, with the majority of the members choosing to respond to Hoffman in a conciliatory manner. Dignity/Toledo's response reads:

Dignity Toledo recognizes and accepts the American Bishops Letter of 1976 "To Live in Jesus Christ" as the official teaching of the Catholic Church. We, as members, proclaim Chastity as an admirable Christian virtue. Even more so, we encourage our fellow members to lead chaste lives....when somebody does fail...we try to be as open, charitable and non-judgmental as we humanly can.⁵¹

This response, and a subsequent letter that stated that Dignity/Toledo "...would not condemn all gay sexual expression"⁵² resulted in a decision, in March

⁵⁰ Dignity/Toledo chaplain, correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

⁵¹ Dignity/Toledo, correspondence with Hoffman, attributed to September, 1987; Dignity / Toledo chaplain, correspondence with author, 11 July and 16 June 1989.

⁵² Dignity/Toledo, correspondence with author, 16 June 1989.

1988, that Dignity must leave its home parish. The chapter's "Exodus Liturgy" was held at St. Francis on 31 August 1988, with intensive media coverage. Since 8 September 1988, the chapter has celebrated masses at a Unitarian Church, with attendance ranging from thirty to fifty individuals.⁵³ Recently, Hoffman has stated that "...my ultimate difficulty with Dignity is its rejection of the Catholic moral teaching relative to homosexual activities."⁵⁴ The Toledo chapter's experience -- like many other chapters -- illustrates how, in the final analysis, each Dignity chapter will have to address the issue of sexual ethics if it is to maintain its relationship with the Church.

⁵³ Dignity/Toledo chaplain, correspondence with author, 16 June 1988.

⁵⁴ Bishop James R. Hoffman, correspondence with author, 28 July 1989.

SECTION II.

CHAPTER III

PUBLIC PAPERS

This chapter, which includes a review of published material, including Dignity local chapter and national newsletters dating back to 1976, seeks to determine what impact Dignity has on its members' lives, and to assess the significance of this influence.

Many of the articles used in this chapter are unsigned, reflecting both the intimate quality of the newsletters and the need of many of its members, even in the protected Dignity milieu, to conceal their full identity and thus, to protect themselves from harassment or discrimination from those outside of the

Dignity community who have access to these documents. Dignity newsletters circulate, not only among the members, but in the larger homosexual and heterosexual communities.

Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Catholics in Parishes.

It is true that many Dignity officers and members do report a satisfactory involvement in their home parishes, where they serve as lectors and eucharistic ministers while sitting on parish councils and commissions. However, in contrast, the majority of Dignity members who were interviewed as part of this research project recount negative reactions strong enough to keep them from making any further attempts to join another parish. Dignity literature contains frequent comments by members relating their feelings of rejection and alienation at the parish level. Woods cites the comments of a Dignity member who said, "I can hardly conceive of being accepted in a straight parish, unless the world changes drastically....gay people will always be...outsiders...."¹

In interviews, conversations, and the literature,

¹ Richard Woods, Another Kind of Love: Homosexuality and Spirituality 3rd ed. (Fort Wayne, IN: Knoll, 1988), 117.

Dignity members confirm that the gay and lesbian persons who first encounter rejection do so at the parish level in the intimate setting of the confessional or reconciliation room, as they seek sacramental absolution, counselling, or spiritual direction. Woods charges that, in fact, all too frequently, gay and lesbian people, instead of finding Christ, come face-to-face with extraordinary hostility at the hands of the very priests sent into communities to dispense, in the name of the Church, Christ's forgiveness in the form of the sacrament of penance as celebrated in the Rite of Reconciliation. Woods, who recounts a harsh and inhumane penance formerly routinely administered by priests to gay men in one Chicago parish on a regular basis, believes such penances are not unusual, stating:

Atrocities have not been uncommon in the religious experience of gays. I have heard many accounts of psychological and even physical abuse, such as a confessor's shouting at a penitent in the confessional of a crowded church, or even pulling a teenager out of the 'box' and striking him.⁴²

One priest, a respondent to a survey in Bordisso's study on the relationship between Roman Catholic priests' moral development and sexual orientation

⁴² Ibid., 99.

states how he came to found a chapter in Des Moines, Iowa.³⁹ The Des Moines priest had heard the confession of and granted absolution to a young gay who had been subject to the screaming harangue of another priest who had told the gay penitent, in a clearly audible voice, to never again "...darken the door of a church."⁴⁰ After working with twenty-five to thirty gay men and lesbian women who later approached him for counselling, this priest states that it was only through his acceptance of and ministry to gay and lesbian people that he was able to come to terms with, and eventually admit to, his own sexual orientation.⁴¹

This type of experience especially injures the psyche of the gay or lesbian person described by an anonymous nun who characterises Dignity members as people exhibiting an intense, almost old-fashioned spirituality that values tradition. Dignity members, the nun continues, seek their Church's acceptance through encounters in the Eucharist and confessional.

³⁹ Lou A. Bordisso, "The Relationship Between Levels of Moral Development and Sexual Orientation of Roman Catholic Priests" (Ph.D. diss., University of San Francisco, 1988), 91-92.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

They hope to meet, initiate discussion and identify with priests, nuns, and brothers.⁶

A gay priest explains the impact that ill treatment in the confessional had on him:

A man ought to feel good about his sexuality. Unfortunately, I don't feel good about my homosexuality....The Church was the first to preach love, and remains the last to show understanding and compassion for the homosexual....And if Scripture and the official Church could put down homosexuals, priests did it more often and better...they were part of the supermacho cabal that made homosexuals leave the Church in droves. (Agony of Agonies is confessing to a man who names you queer.)

Consequently, I, and a legion of closeted men, lived in fear and shame. Undertakers, we buried our own identities. Traitors, we denied we knew ourselves a thousand times. Torturers, we chained ourselves in a dungeon of guilt and despair.⁷

These reports lend validity to Dignity members' assertions that not all gay and lesbian Catholics can worship with, much less fully participate in, a traditional parish community geared to serve a population consisting largely of heterosexual couples

⁶ Anonymous. "Gaily Ministering: A Conversation Between Gay Women Religious," in Theological Pastoral Resources: A Collection of Articles on Homosexuality from a Pastoral Perspective, 6th ed., ed. Kathleen Leopold and Thomas Orians (Washington, DC: Dignity, Inc. 1985), 51.

⁷ Anonymous, "A Closed Letter to My Friends," Dignity/Inc. Newsletter, Sept. 1976, 6.

and their families. Pastoral ministers, as a rule, plan Masses, liturgies, and other devotional and spiritual exercises to meet the needs of the majority group in most parishes that consists of nuclear families and, to a lesser degree, heterosexual young adults and singles, widows, and the divorced -- other groups that constitute visible minorities in most U.S. parishes. In this setting, little probability exists that gay and lesbian people can easily gain access to instruction, homilies, or spiritual direction designed to help them address specific issues related to gay problems or lifestyles -- unless they encounter a knowledgeable or sympathetic priest.

In discussing pastoral approaches to the unique problems that gay and lesbian persons face in their local parishes, Oddo provides a partial explanation for gay and lesbians' discomfort when he states that even the most sympathetic heterosexual clergy sometimes dreads contacts with gay and lesbian persons, stating, "Diocesan priests continue to panic when lesbians and gay men approach them or come out within a parish."¹²

¹² Oddo, Tom, "Tempering the Myth of Gay Ministry," in Theological Pastoral Resources: A Collection of Articles on Homosexuality from a Pastoral Perspective, 6th ed., ed. Kathleen Leopold and Thomas Orians (Washington, DC: Dignity, Inc., 1985), 37.

In short, the gay and lesbian community shares, as part of its collective history, a considerable repertoire of individuals' painful memories of failed attempts at integration into local parishes. Consequently, many members regard Dignity as their home parish from which they receive the acceptance they need to thrive. Lempicki, in comparing Dignity to a parish, acknowledges the fact that some gay and lesbian people participate in heterosexual parishes. However, Lempicki states that the majority of these gay and lesbian people who maintain an active involvement in their parishes receive little in return for their efforts, unlike their heterosexual counterparts. Specifically, marriage encounter groups, Lempicki writes, can't invite gays to participate because that would involve acknowledging the legitimacy of gay and lesbian relationships. Parents' clubs don't welcome gay or lesbian parents. Teen clubs won't condone same-sex dating. Lempicki doubts that parishes place people with AIDS on lay ministers' sick call lists, although Lempicki notes, all heterosexual parish groups welcome an infusion of gay and lesbian muscle power and creative energy for beautification or maintenance projects, while gay and lesbian money is happily

included in all parish fund raising projects."⁷

As a result, the gay or lesbian persons seeking involvement in a Catholic parish often simply walk away for the same reason that an over-forty gay male who participated in a Chapel Hill, North Carolina joint Dignity/Integrity chapter's liturgy articulated:

I had to leave off worshipping with my parish this last year after I discovered that they are mainly a heterosexual club interested more in preserving that identity than in ministering to and welcoming all of us particularly in this agonizing year when I have been discovering myself.¹⁰

The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life corroborates Dignity members' perceptions that they feel alienated, uncomfortable and unwelcome in what should be their home parishes. The study results indicate that active, registered parishioners use sexually related matters as a criterion for considering whether or not they should regard other lay persons whom they encounter as true Catholics. Specifically, The Notre Dame study found that heterosexual lay Catholics use homosexuality, along with abortion,

⁷ Joe Lempicki, "Dignity as a Parish," Dignity, Inc. Newsletter, July/August 1984, 1.

¹⁰ Louie Crew, "Dignity: A View from Outside," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion 2:1 (Fall, 1977) 20-21 20.

cohabitation, and the commission of a serious crime as a basis for an exclusionary judgement.¹¹ Volunteer lay leaders in thirty-six of the parishes studied by the Notre Dame project indicated that they considered practising homosexuals second only to those urging or undergoing abortions -- acts that involve automatic excommunication -- and just above those who have committed serious crimes, as outside the Church's boundaries.¹²

In view of this documented evidence that gay and lesbian people have been judged so severely by their lay peers who have, in two-thirds of the cases, been recruited by their parish priests to serve in a leadership capacity in their parish, it is understandable that even those gay or lesbian persons active in their home parishes feel too intimidated or too afraid to reveal or discuss anything too closely related to their sexual orientation or life style with most of the heterosexual people they interact with in their home parishes. They remain "in the closet." It

¹¹ David C. Leege and Joseph Gremillion, eds., "Who Is a True Catholic? Social Boundaries on the Church," in Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life No. 12 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1988) 3-4.

¹² Ibid., 3-4, 6.

is the price the gay or lesbian person pays for integration in parish life. Remaining closeted is a process of denial that often includes the individual's blocking the integration of his or her personality as the gay or lesbian person painstakingly conceals or denies a critical portion of his or her sexuality, a principal component of every person's selfhood.

Whatever feedback the gay or lesbian person experiences in such a milieu may seriously distort his or her self image because, as Mead states, it is only within the context of social interaction that one learns one's about oneself, as one absorbs others' attitudes and judgments about oneself.¹³

In any case, whether or not they or their pastors admit it, integration in a parish under these terms means, to the gay or lesbian person, that he or she must constantly monitor and censor any and all references to their private lives and significant other -- a person to whom they may have made a life long commitment. It means hiding the simple joys that are part of any relationship, including the pain and agony resulting from relational discord, the worry over a

¹³ Mead, George Herbert, The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead, ed. Anselm Strauss 2nd ed. (Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago, 1956), 215-216.

lover's serious illness, or, with increasing frequency, the shock, pain, and grief of a loved one's recent or impending death. An analogous situation would be one in which a married heterosexual person, for some unknown reason, had to camouflage or hide that marriage, feeling free to speak about or hint at this important aspect of the married person's very being. The cement of pain combines with bricks of concealment to build a wall blocking any shadow of true intimate friendships from those with whom this individual interacts with.

The situation worsens when, as part of the pattern of deception needed to maintain a heterosexual facade, the gay or lesbian person becomes trapped in situations in which he or she is forced to laugh at and otherwise participate in demeaning, anti-gay "jokes" that only perpetrate additional discrimination and injustice. Thus, heterosexual Catholics who interact frequently with a gay or lesbian person in the parish setting are shut out of important aspects of gay or lesbian co-parishioners' lives. Consequently, friendly heterosexual people in the parishes have little or no opportunity to discard discriminatory or prejudicial attitudes. In short, the cycle of homophobia

continues.

Tragically, this combination of rejection and deception deprives parishes of the genuine gifts that gay and lesbian people could offer their sister and brother Catholics. McNaught believes, in fact, that the very presence of gay and lesbian people, society's lepers, indicts those who equate faith only with compliance with an array of human-made rules, rather than obeying Christ's primary command to love others¹⁴ McNaught proclaims:

The unique beauty with which our trials have endowed us [gay and lesbian people] provides us with a vision to be shared with those whose eyes are scaled with contentment. The commitment to the Faith which gay Catholics personify by their determination to sit through a service that condemns homosexuality...to pray with brothers and sisters who would hold back the kiss of peace if they knew you were gay; to proudly announce your religious affiliation when the leaders of your Church have condemned you to hell; is a persecution for the Faith which most Catholics have only read about in Lives of the Saints.¹⁵

This martyrdom, and the consequent loss of talent to a parish is vividly portrayed in one member's story as he contrasts his experiences in his parish with the

¹⁴ Brian McNaught, "Gay and Catholic," in Positively Gay, ed. Betty Berzon (Los Angeles, CA: Mediamix Associates, 1979), 63.

¹⁵ Ibid.

love and acceptance he found in Dignity. Fornino describes his experiences of revealing his sexual orientation to others in his home parish prior to the publication of a newspaper article that discussed his efforts to found successfully a Dignity chapter. At first, others in his parish privately voiced their support and understanding. The following week, the pastor preached a sermon on the need for special ministries for minorities. But on the next Sunday, that same pastor banned Fornino from continuing his volunteer work as a children's religious education teacher and as a lector during Sunday masses. Fornino was told that he would only be welcome as an inactive, silent member of the congregation. Fornino recalls:

I was shunned by most of the congregation and only my real friends talked to me. I didn't go to Church, but spent the time in the CCD [religious education] office crying. One of my students came in crying because she couldn't understand why everybody was being mean to me. It was good to know that I reached someone with the gospel message of love.¹⁶

The pain Fornino and other members have endured, seems to have intensified and spiritualized the value of Dignity in their lives. Another man writes:

¹⁶ Felix M. Fornino, "Thank You Dignity," Bridges (Dignity/San Francisco) 11:4 (April 1987), unpaginated.

For me, to be a Christian in Dignity is to be a witness for my God, it is to exemplify, together with my fellow Christians, life as a gay Christian -- a person who is proud to carry the message of faith, hope, and charity and who makes no apologies, but instead celebrates my God-given gay life.¹⁷

Importance of Acceptance.

Thus, it is apparent that many gay and lesbian Catholics find it difficult, if not impossible, to meet one of their most basic needs, acceptance, in their local parishes. Rogers defines acceptance as the warm regard one person expresses towards others, viewing and treating them as persons of unconditional worth and value, regardless of behaviour or feelings. To Rogers, acceptance includes respecting others' attitudes -- whether they are positive or negative or contradictory. Rogers states that acceptance of all of the changing aspects of an individual constitutes a relationship of warmth and safety. This safety, and experience of being not only liked, but prized as a person, Rogers concludes, is a major element in any helping relationship.¹⁸ According to Tenenbaum, Rogers

¹⁷ Nick, "A Witness for Our God," Dignity/Lafayette Newsletter, 4:6 May 1987, 3.

¹⁸ Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 34.

believes that if a person experiences unconditional acceptance, along with compassion and sympathy instead of a judgmental attitude, the individual can come to terms with previously denied facets of his or her personality.¹⁷

The respected Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, stresses the critical significance attached to the individual's realization of acceptance in his or her spiritual life. Tillich compares the awareness of acceptance by the Creator to the beam of light shattering a moonless night's utter blackness. In acceptance, according to Tillich, human beings experience sin-conquering grace, allowing reconciliation to replace alienation.²⁰ Ideally, individual Catholics encounter human acceptance through relationships and experiences they share as participants in the life of their local faith community -- the parish.

Dignity expresses this spirit of acceptance in a

¹⁷ Samuel Tenenbaum, "Carl R. Rogers and Non-Directive Teaching," in On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy, by Carl R. Rogers (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961), 305.

²⁰ Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," chap. in The Shaking of the Foundations (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 161-162.

poem printed in national and chapter newsletters. Each of the first three stanzas tell, respectively, of the author's rejection by parents, by employer, and by friends. The lover alone embraces the narrator. In the fifth stanza, as the narrator tells God that the narrator cannot love himself because of his gayness, God replies that love is possible because God delights in the gay author because God created gay people the way they are. With this acceptance, human rejection becomes a manageable problem.⁸¹

A recent statement by the National Council of Catholic Bishops defines the relationship between the laity and their parishes, emphasizing the position of parishes in church structure as the "...single most important part of the Church. This is where the mission of Christ continues."⁸² When the U.S. bishops describe the parish as the setting in which Christians minister to one another, they seem to emphasize this concept of acceptance in their vision of the parish as

⁸¹ Anonymous, "Does It Matter?," (reprinted from Dignity, Inc. and Dignity/New Mexico Newsletters), Dignity/Omaha Newsletter, April 1987, unpaginated.

⁸² National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on the Parish, The Parish: A People, A Mission, A Structure (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops), 3.

the home for the alienated and the poor."¹²³

Dignity: An Antidote to Rejection.

The interviews discussed in Chapter IV confirm the fact that, without Dignity's support, many gay and lesbian Catholics who find themselves alienated from the Church at its grass roots level, the parish, experience profound spiritual isolation as they find themselves deprived of the comfort of the sacraments because of the combined effects of prejudice and their own human fear of hurt and the pain of possible rejection or stigmatization. Consequently, many gay and lesbian people, to fill unmet spiritual needs, attend Dignity Masses. In contrast to the parishes they left behind, "Most people who come to Dignity find a worshipping faith community which makes them feel welcome, feel important, feel needed and loved."¹²⁴

A San Francisco Bay Area gay man who attended a Dignity meeting reported that it was the first time in his life that he, as a gay man, had felt accepted by

¹²³ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁴ Anonymous, "What Makes Dignity Happen?," (reprint from Dignity/Baltimore Newsletter Spring, 1988) The Cardinal (Dignity/Cincinnati), unpaginated.

the Church.²⁵⁵ Woods, discussing gays' and lesbians' involvement with Dignity, relates the observations of a fifty-year-old male who finally returns to the Church through Dignity, where he could "...serve God...as the person I really am."²⁵⁶ Yet another Dignity member states:

I was born and raised Catholic. I went to a Catholic grammar school and Catholic high school...I knew I was gay since about five or six years old....But at a certain point...I was told by my Church and people around me that you are no good, you're not the same as us, you're different than us. I knew in my heart that...that's not true, that God still loved me....I believed what I was taught, that God made me in His image and likeness, that I was welcome in the Church and I still am. I was away from the Church for about 20 years....I'm back...only because of Dignity....and I can express my belief in God and my religious values that I can't do in a regular parish....²⁵⁷

In the Detroit newsletter, a member comments on Dignity's welcoming atmosphere and the relief, at least in the milieu of the Dignity Mass and various social events, of not having to hide his orientation out of fear of exposure and its serious consequences,

²⁵⁵ Joe Halloran, Understanding Homosexual Persons: Straight Answers from Gays (Hicksville, NY: Exposition, 1979), 19.

²⁵⁶ Woods, Another Kind of Love, 117.

²⁵⁷ The Donahue Show, transcript #03277, 6.

as he had in the past. Also, the Detroit member discovered that, in Dignity, he no longer had to fear living in a straight world, by straight rules. This individual found, in Dignity, a setting where gay issues and events are openly discussed with the result that his self-awareness as a gay person was raised.²²⁹ McGraw shows how Dignity's emphasis on acceptance results in spiritual growth instead of "getting by" as McGraw relates how he joined Dignity as a "...broken and beat up..." human being.²³⁰ In time, McGraw recognized that much of his problem was anger "...as a result of a faulty belief system regarding the nature of the Church and God." In Dignity McGraw learned to regard the Church as a mother who has badly injured him. McGraw still loves that mother and now hopes to talk with her about the causes of that pain, so others will no longer have to suffer needlessly at this parent's hands.²³¹

A lesbian mathematics teacher explains her view of

²²⁹ Bob Anthony, "Why I Love Dignity/Detroit: A Guest Editorial," Dignity/Detroit Newsletter, January 1977, unpaginated.

²³⁰ McGraw, Dignity/Detroit Newsletter, May 1984, unpaginated.

²³¹ McGraw, Dignity/Detroit Newsletter, October, 1984, unpaginated.

Dignity's significance:

Dignity, by its presence, educates, forces a rethinking of issues, a broadening of scope....Dignity provides access to our history, to our literature and to our culture...We have the opportunity to witness for other gays who find Dignity as an alternative to the bars, who find friends at Dignity who share the same values....Through Dignity I found a facet of the church that acknowledged that gays are...people. In Dignity masses there are homilies that address the issues I face daily as a gay....[and]give courage to continue in my small attempt to stand in witness to the gay lifestyle....In Dignity, I am a reader at mass and more importantly, a member of a community.²¹

Brian McNaught, Dignity/Detroit's founder and first president, by verbalizing his struggle to accept and convince others to accept his gayness, articulates the ongoing agony of many other Dignity members who continue to fight to integrate their spirituality and their sexuality. McNaught's story illustrates the price many gay men and lesbian women pay before they find a way to meet their need for acceptance. Consequently, Dignity has regarded McNaught as a spokesman, mailing copies of his autobiographical book, A Disturbed' Peace to all U.S. bishops. Even today,

²¹ Anonymous, "I Am a Person of Dignity," (reprinted from Dignity/Tampa Bay Newsletter), Dimensions (Dignity/San Diego) 17:5 August 1988, unpaginated.

priests and counsellors recommend this book to those who approach them, full of fear and anxiety, seriously confronting their sexual orientation for the first time.

In the book, McNaught details his battle to come to terms with a non-heterosexual orientation. The conflict ended on a gurney in a hospital emergency room after McNaught chased down a bottle of pills with a bottle of paint thinner in an aborted suicide attempt. While medical personnel pumped his stomach, McNaught resolved to stop trying to live up to others' expectations that he live as a heterosexual. Instead, McNaught concluded that, to survive, he had to accept himself and admit his true sexual orientation.⁹⁰

Dignity as Part of the "Coming Out" Process.

Many other Dignity members have survived experiences just as harrowing and painful, although not told in quite as dramatic a fashion. This struggle for self-acceptance and acceptance by others, that commonly includes traumatic rejection, is known as the coming

⁹⁰ Brian McNaught, A Disturbed Peace: Selected Writings of an Irish Catholic Homosexual (Washington, DC: Dignity, Inc., 1981), 3rd printing Feb. 1986, 87; McNaught, On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love, Stonewall Inn Edition, gen. ed. Michael Denny (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 12, 142.

out process. Cohen and Stein explain:

Coming out refers to a complicated developmental process which involves at a psychological level a person's awareness and acknowledgement of homosexual thoughts and feelings. For some persons, coming out ultimately leads to public identification as a gay man or lesbian....Coming out involves stepping out of the metaphorical closet where one's homosexuality has been hidden from others and often even from oneself. A parallel process is not possible for a person who is heterosexual simply because there is not a similar need to hide heterosexuality in this society.³¹³

Throughout the coming out process, gays and lesbian persons must lay claim to previously rejected aspects of self in the face of the hatred and mistrust society directs towards gay men and lesbian women.³¹⁴ Coming out entails a number of risks ranging from the shame, embarrassment, exclusion, and alienation described earlier by Fornino, to violence at the hands of the individual's own parents.

Participants in an hour-long television panel discussion devoted to the rising incidence of violence perpetrated against gay and lesbian persons cited

³¹³ Carol J. Cohen and Terry S. Stein, "Reconceptualizing Individual Psychotherapy with Gay Men and Lesbians," in Contemporary Perspectives with Lesbians and Gay Men, ed. T. S. Stein and C. J. Cohen (New York: Plenum Medical Book, 1986), 32.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

examples of parental violence committed against adolescent or adult gay and lesbian children. The panel members, a Dignity officer active in an anti-violence task force, and a lawyer who specializes in gay and lesbian issues, told of instances in which gay and lesbian people called the crisis lines in shock, pain and desperation after coming out -- sharing the secret of their sexual orientation -- with their parents. Instead of acceptance and understanding, these young gay men and lesbian women encountered not just rejection and anger, but severe beatings and subsequent eviction from the family circle and the only home they have ever known.⁷⁵

In such a situation, the lawyer in the panel explained, the adolescent gay or lesbian can claim little or no legal protection. They often have no one to turn to for help except those in the gay community who have either survived similar hostility or, who, coming from a more supportive background with loving

⁷⁵ Kelly & Co., WXYZ Channel 7, broadcast, August, 1989.

and accepting parents and extended family,¹⁶ possess sufficient strength and self-confidence to assist those in the throes of acute psychological or physical pain.

A Detroit Free Press article arguing in support of a proposed civil rights law that, had it received legislative approval, would have protected gay men and lesbian women in the state of Michigan, contained the story of a 20-year-old college freshman who came out to his parents. To the student's dismay:

They sold all of his clothes, books and furniture, stopped sending him money, returned his letters unopened, hung up when he called and did not pick him up from school...."My son has died," his mother told him on the phone.¹⁷

This type of rejection story, not uncommon in the gay and lesbian community, shrivels the most stalwart, self-assured individual's self-esteem. However, by fostering an atmosphere of welcome self-acceptance, Dignity provides a counterpoint to this damaging, negative assault on the self. To some of its members,

¹⁶ Such a family environment is described in: Michael Reese and Pamela Abramson, "One Family's Struggle," Newsweek 107:2 (13 January 1986): 55-58. The subject is also discussed in: Barbara Kantrowitz, et al., "Growing Up Gay," Newsweek 107:2 (13 January 1986): 50-52.

¹⁷ Susan Ager, "A Homosexual's Place in a Heterosexual World," Detroit Free Press Detroit Magazine, 29 April 1984, 27.

consequently, Dignity is family, as this member explains:

Dignity is, quite literally, my family and as such contains all that any family has. As in any loving family we do not always agree...But all are part of the family.... Reaching to God is attained by reaching out to and through others [in the family]....It is our visible testimony of the Holy Spirit.

It was through Dignity that I was able to continue a journey to God after a long period of being in the wilderness. I have been accepted for who I am, though sometimes that acceptance did not come easy. When I travel, I know that there is a loving family in most large cities. When I have joy, there's a family to share it with. When I have pain, there's family to help make it possible to endure it.²⁰⁹

In any case, Dignity members and friends nurture one another through these painful experiences. As Fornino faced the rejection of his fellow parishioners, he recalls that Dignity members stood by his side, and so, through his pain, he acquired a deeper knowledge of his own identity:

Finally I was free. It was out and I felt good. No longer did I have to hide who I was. I found that there were people...who would accept me for who I was. I could be myself and I found I liked me....I tell the story because it explains what I owe Dignity. Dignity helped me find out who I was and how my religion could be integrated. Dignity means a lot to me...I thank Dignity for my lover whom I met at a Dignity meeting....

²⁰⁹ Kelly M. "Our Dignity," Dignity/Houston Newsletter, 15:9 September 1988, unpaginated.

Dignity made me into a whole person....I can never repay Dignity for all it has done for me.³⁷

Psychologist and sex therapist Eli Coleman cites empirical evidence to underscore the importance of acceptance in healthy psychological adjustment of a gay or lesbian individual. Coleman states:

No one can develop self-concepts such as 'accepted,' 'valued,' or 'worthwhile,' all alone. One must take risks to gain acceptance from others.....Once an individual gains acceptance from a number of persons, it is much easier to withstand rejection, or even indirect rejection by society.⁴⁰

Psychotherapist and theologian John J. McNeill agrees that this process of basic acceptance of self and sexuality is necessary for the gay or lesbian person's psychological and spiritual growth, development and maturity. McNeill agrees with Coleman and argues that acknowledgment of one's homosexual identity is a prerequisite for healthy growth. McNeill outlines the major role Dignity plays in the lives of its members in this way:

³⁷ Fornino, "Thank You," unpaginated.

⁴⁰ Eli Coleman, "Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process," in Homosexuality & Psychotherapy: A Practitioner's Handbook of Affirmative Models, ed. John C. Gonsiorek, 31-43. Research on Homosexuality Series, ed. John P. De Cecco, Journal of Homosexuality, 7:2/3 (New York: Haworth, 1982.), 34-35.

One of the primary functions of gay social and religious groups is to provide the 'accepting environment' in which one can learn to accept and love oneself as gay. Acceptance, originally denied us in the family setting, is not something that we can give ourselves; rather it is something we give each other....Once a gay or lesbian person has become part of a community of accepting friends with whom he or she can share their joys and sorrows as gay people, it is much easier to withstand the rejection of other friends, family members, and society without intense shame and guilt."¹

Those who attend Dignity functions have begun to take the first steps towards openly accepting their own gayness, just as one's attendance at a gay or lesbian bar, as a rule, signals the individual's self-identification as a homosexual person because such participation is an attempt to achieve inclusion in the gay and lesbian subculture. Because Dignity's official statements, documents, and activities are specifically slanted to the gay and lesbian population, an individual attending a Dignity function realizes that others attending this same activity as well as passersby will probably automatically assume the newcomer has a homosexual orientation. This up-front, open attitude facilitates a self-acceptance that leaves

¹ John J. McNeill, Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians and Their Lovers, Families and Friends (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1988), 68-69.

little room for self-delusion or denial.

McNeill documents one of the common shared liminal experiences of many Dignity members, the difficult decision to attend a Dignity liturgy for the first time. In the instance McNeill cites, it took a young man four attempts to overcome his fear and anxiety before entering the church. Attending the liturgy for the first time, McNeill reports, proved to be the symbolic act that overcame the youth's other defenses, allowing him to successfully address, in psychotherapy, issues of self-esteem and self-acceptance.⁴²

According to Brown, denial of true sexual orientation is a common trap for gay men and lesbian women to slip into because of the fact that they conclude that they cannot possibly be homosexual because they do not fit the image of the typical stereotypes of the gay or lesbian.⁴³ Brown argues that this denial occurs because of the extent to which various aspects of society still perceive gay and lesbian people in a negative light. Educators belittle or shunt aside gay and lesbian history, entertainers

⁴² Ibid., 68.

⁴³ Howard Brown, Familiar Faces Hidden Lives: The Story of Homosexual Men in America Today, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 42.

continue to portray only repulsive caricatures of the stereotypical drag queen or effeminate gay; lawmakers and law enforcers see only the mug shot of the homosexual as a criminal. Meanwhile, closeted gays spend so much energy maintaining their straight image that they dare not extend a helping hand to other gay and lesbian people. Consequently, gay people may be shocked to discover that they -- and other gay and lesbian persons -- do not fall into stereotypical pigeonholes."

And the over-40 members seem to have a special appreciation for Dignity, seeing it as, at long last, an expression of honesty in the Roman church. One man states:

You see, gays and lesbians of my generation had our capacities for love psychologically impaired by a hypocritical society and...church which advocated one set of values and practised another....in order to survive at all, we were forced into a denial of our authentic selves, and so were compelled to sacrifice our integrity at the altar of hypocrisy....Dignity taught me that I must be who I am; that I cannot be what some other person or institution thinks I should be. Dignity taught me about something I had forgotten even existed: real love and caring. Dignity conferred a sense of belonging...I had never experienced in my life. For the first time, I felt the freedom to be who I was, and this feeling was so

" Ibid., 42-44.

overpowering that I am no longer willing to deny who I really was [sic]....I have regained my sense of integrity....Dignity is guiding me toward meaningful retirement years in ways I would never have been able to do by myself. It is gratifying to know that these years do not have to be spent in fear and hiding as my formative and young adult years were."³

Dignity may not consciously acknowledge, in its literature, another important need that it meets: providing positive role models for those just coming to terms with their sexual orientation. Brown eloquently describes the cognitive dissonance that some gay men encounter when they can no longer deny their sexual orientation, but they cannot accept their gayness because they fail to identify with the image of the stereotypical, effeminate gay male, and they discover, to their surprise, that to a certain extent, the minority gay and lesbian community mirrors the majority, heterosexual community. Brown states that this is an area where gay groups make their most significant contribution to the gay culture."⁴

After Brown publicly revealed his homosexual orientation and spoke at a symposium on homosexuality,

³ John Carr, "A Message of Love to my Community," Bridges, (Dignity/San Francisco), 11:2 February 1987, unpaginated.

⁴ Brown, Familiar Faces, 43-45.

Brown received a letter from a young male stating:

"You have shown me that being 'queer' does not mean that my life must be a succession of gay bars, washrooms, and bathhouses. If any more of us had the courage to speak out, we could accept ourselves and one another as human beings."⁴⁷

Some individuals find, in Dignity, support for their decision to build, sustain and intensify committed relationships. Lewis quotes a Dignity woman who explains Dignity's impact on her relationship, "'Since my lover and I started coming to Dignity (a year ago), it's brought us closer together. It seems like there's a warmth (here)'"⁴⁸ According to Lewis, this member felt a part of the Dignity community after encountering a high school teacher at a Dignity Mass.⁴⁹

Thus, Dignity members, in a totally unselfconscious manner, minister to one another just by freely being themselves and delighting in the very thing that society condemns them for: their gayness. The same smiling, happy people who share the newcomer's

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸ Brian Lewis, "Gay Catholics Find Faith in Dignity: Lay Organization Works for Church Acceptance," (reprinted from Los Angeles Independent) The Dignity Angelus (Dignity/Los Angelus), 20:3 March 1989, unpaginated.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

same-sex orientation -- the same orientation that, in different settings precipitated a range of negative experiences -- act as powerful symbols of people who have found a niche in the life of the Catholic church. Officers and members plan liturgies themselves, seeking other gay men and lesbian women to read scripture, assist in the distribution of the Eucharist and perform other liturgical roles. In some chapters, gay as well as straight priests serve as chaplains or celebrants, providing the ultimate role models and symbols of acceptance to the Dignity members.

The Role Priests and Religious Play in Dignity.

Gay men and lesbian women value the presence of those consecrated to God's service because, "For a minister of God's Word to walk into gay society is to proclaim that Christ belongs there."¹⁰ In turn, the Dignity community lavishly showers their celebrants and pastoral ministers with affirmation. Ranallo, writing as a Dignity chaplain, explains that, in ministering to this group of bitter and wounded Catholics, "Dignity has touched and nourished each of us in a unique

¹⁰ Peter J. Fink, "Homosexuality: A Pastoral Hypothesis," in Theological Pastoral Resources: A Collection of Articles on Homosexuality from a Pastoral Perspective, 6th ed., ed. Kathleen Leopold and Thomas Orians (Washington, DC: Dignity, Inc., 1985), 25.

way....Our common ministry in Dignity is that we can heal others because we have been wounded so deeply."⁵¹

However, ministry to the gay and lesbian community is not a mission undertaken without the risk of stigmatization to the minister, as Nugent points out:

The minister has to be ready to handle the stigma that...is still attached to anyone who becomes involved in helping homosexual people. The minister will have to...cope with suspicions, curiosity, personal questions, insinuations, assumptions, and even rumours and gossip. (I worked for nearly three years on skid row, and no one even once asked me if I were an alcoholic!) There might even be attempts at intimidation. But if we...are sincere about wanting to help heal some of the pain and sense of alienation that gay Catholics feel....We must even be willing to share in some of their oppression, which does come to a minister who works publicly with gay people.⁵²

Gay priests in the Bordisso study on moral development of Roman Catholic priests indicate that they rely on Dignity for support in their ministry.⁵³ Bordisso's findings are corroborated in Gramick's

⁵¹ John Ranallo, "Being the Church!" in Insight: A Quarterly of Lesbian/Gay Christian Opinion 4:1 (Winter, 1980), 8.

⁵² C. Robert Nugent, "Gay Ministry," in Theological Pastoral Resources: A Collection of Articles on Homosexuality from a Pastoral Perspective, ed. Kathleen Leopold and Thomas Orians (Washington, DC: Dignity, Inc.), 31.

⁵³ Bordisso, "Moral Development and Sexual Orientation," 169, 175.

recent work that specifically deals with gay and lesbian priests, brothers and nuns.⁵⁴ Gramick's work differs from some other works on the subject because it includes the biographies of men and women who, while acknowledging their sexual orientation and all the conflicts this entails, came to terms with their commitments. And Dignity played a role in many of these individuals' decisions to remain, not only in their Church, but in their respective ministries. One lesbian nun describes how Dignity members helped her during a five year period while she recommitted herself to her vows.⁵⁵ This nun, who regularly attends her local chapter's liturgies explains,

Here I feel I have something to give as well as to receive. Since there are very few women in this group, my presence is a support to the other women, as well as a needed feminine presence in the group as a whole....For those who are put off by media stereotypes of gay people, this image of a group of worshipping Christians concerned about community, faithfulness, and service

⁵⁴ Jeannine Gramick, ed. Homosexuality in the Priesthood and the Religious Life. (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁵⁵ Sister Linda, "Gifts Given," in Homosexuality in the Priesthood and the Religious Life, ed. Jeannine Gramick (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 93.

can do much to change one-sided attitudes.⁵⁶

According to the sociologist Wolf, gay priests also find a special reward in ministering to the gay community. It is a chance to drop the protective facade many must erect in the presence of an overwhelming majority of heterosexual parishioners. Wolf states:

These priests reveal very important aspects of their lives only with the utmost caution. It appears that they hold strong personal allegiances to both the Catholic church and the gay community, yet they are quite unwilling to openly and simultaneously identify themselves with both groups for fear of rejection....It is only in those relatively rare situations in which the gay priest can engage in active ministry that he can enjoy the highest level of personal fulfilment.⁵⁷

However, not all Dignity celebrants are gay. Thus, their reasons for involvement vary with the individuals. Some priests and nuns participate in Dignity out of a desire to minister to an oppressed people. (Chapter V discusses other reasons for

⁵⁶ Sister Mary, "The Lost Coin," in Homosexuality in the Priesthood and the Religious Life, ed. Jeannine Gramick (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 67.

⁵⁷ James G. Wolf, "Homosexuality and Religious Ideology: A Report on Gay Catholic Priests in the United States," chap. in Gay Priests (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 70.

clerical involvement.) Regardless of the priests' and nuns' motives, clerical involvement in the Dignity movement silently addresses the plethora of painful encounters that gay and lesbian persons have endured in the past and provides some minimal explanation for the involvement of some of the priests and religious in Dignity. The presence of the clergy as celebrants or members of the congregation during liturgies, at the subsequent social and dinner, acts as a healing balm, a caring antidote that counteracts the hurt that, in the past, drove so many Dignity members from their parishes and from the Church.

Thus, in a very real way, Dignity provides the security and support for gay and lesbian persons that the parish fills for heterosexual persons. This is true, even though Dignity fails to comply with the 1983 Code of Canon Law description of a parish, and, considering the eviction of many of its chapters, the slim chance Dignity now has of obtaining hierarchical approval.

Nevertheless, Dignity/Detroit continues to provide regularly scheduled services including a weekly Sunday Mass and a weekly prayer service based on the Liturgy of the Hours. The chapter also hosts a number of

religiously oriented educational workshops and guest speakers. It hosts an annual weekend retreat given by a carefully selected priest. As in a local parish, discussions on church law, on correct liturgy, and on social justice occur at all levels.

Lempicki claims that Detroit has, in fact, become a parish serving the specific needs of a minority group in the same way that many of this country's ethnic parishes formed to unite their people.

Dissidents we are not. Unique, we are, just as...other congregations are celebrants of their individuality. The Spirit of Dignity remains the same; to join together to worship God in community.¹⁰⁰

Dignity's charism of acceptance, recognized by members and by its priest and nun chaplains, coupled with an open willingness to act in a supportive manner, gives hope and peace to despairing and lonely gay and lesbian persons.

¹⁰⁰ Joe Lempicki, "Dignity as a Parish," In Dignity Inc. Newsletter, July/August 1984, 16:4 1.

CHAPTER IV
INTERVIEW DATA

If Dignity flourishes in the face of Vatican censure because its members find the acceptance and affirmation they seek, then this evidence should be apparent in research conducted at the local level. This section of the research project discusses material garnered from personal interviews with individual members of the Dignity chapters located in Detroit and

Ann Arbor, and in Toledo.

The findings presented in this chapter represent the data from personal interviews with twenty-one male and five female Dignity members who are affiliated with these three chapters. To complete the study, another group of six respondents -- priests and members of religious orders -- fall into the category of chaplains dealt with in Chapter V. In addition a regional bishop, and an activist in the Ann Arbor gay and lesbian community consented to interviews, providing additional information and insights on Dignity. With the exception of four sessions discussed in the methodology appendix, all interviews were audio taped. Ethical issues regarding confidentiality are discussed in detail in the methodology appendix.

Chapters Included in the Study.

Dignity leaders, writing and speaking at the local, national and regional level, underscore their belief that the organization finds its strength in the diversity of the make-up and character of its chapters. The chapters vary from city to city, shaped and moulded by the members to fit their needs. Participant observation at regional HODs, and interviews with officers confirm that a considerable variety exists in

the style and structure of these local chapters. Some chapters stress their members' social needs. They have never met on Church property, and only rarely do they gather to celebrate a liturgy. Other chapters, like Detroit, concentrate on liturgies and members' spiritual needs, while at the same time providing an array of opportunities for social interaction. Some chapters have merged with Protestant or secular gay and lesbian groups. Still others take a conservative stand, stressing the Catholic component of their statements of position and purpose. The three chapters included in this study reflect this diversity. When 700 Dignity representatives from all over the U.S. gathered at the 1989 San Francisco HOD, the Detroit chapter ranked as the fourth largest in the country. Currently, Detroit is the largest chapter in North America that continues to meet on Church property. As stated earlier, the Detroit chapter was one of a small number of chapters at the 1989 San Francisco HOD to voted against approval of an amendment to the Statement of Position and Purpose that endorses the belief that it is moral for gay and lesbian persons to express physically their sexuality. The Detroit chapter president stated that he felt that the changes in the

Statement of Position and Purpose were unnecessary. The chapter president¹ has expressed the fear that assenting votes by the Detroit delegates might be used by the ordinary to evict the chapter from Holy Trinity. To express the Detroit leadership's opposition to the San Francisco amendments, an explanation of Detroit's vote was published in its newsletter¹ and at the general membership meeting of 15 October 1989.

The smaller Toledo chapter was evicted from its home parish when its members refused to state unequivocally that they agree with Church teaching that homosexual activity is sinful. Dignity/Toledo now meets in a Unitarian church. On the other hand, the Ann Arbor chapter dissolved, formally returning its charter to the Region V HOD in Detroit in October 1989.

A. Demographics.

Age.

The twenty-one male members participating in the study ranged in age from twenty-six to sixty-three. Specifically, two of the members were in their twenties, nine were in their thirties; six were in their forties, two were in their fifties, and two were in their sixties.

¹ Dignity / Detroit Newsletter, October, 1989.

The respondents also included five women who ranged in age from twenty-five to seventy-five years of age. Two of these women were in their thirties, two were in their forties, while the seventy-five year old woman was regarded by the males as the chapter's matriarch.

Marital Status.

Four of the male respondents had been married and divorced, having fathered a total of eleven children among them. Only one female respondent had been previously married, and she had borne eight children who had presented her with thirty-two grandchildren and twenty-six great grandchildren. One woman reported that other members of her family were gay.

Seminary or Convent Affiliation.

Four male participants reported a background of seminary training, or some sort of formal affiliation with a religious order, while one male reported spending many years in a boarding school operated by priests. One female respondent spent ten years as a vowed member of a religious order. Another female respondent reported an intense involvement with members of a religious order of women. She attended a number of retreats and activities during a period when she was

considering joining the order and reported that she even thought of herself as a nun during this period.

Employment.

Means of employment for both males and females reflected the diversity of the respondents. The respondent group included the self-employed, blue and white collar automobile worker social service agency and mental health workers, stock or hospital ward clerks, school system employees, librarians, students, hairdressers, media representatives, administrators, computer specialists, and health care professionals (nurses and a physician). While one female respondent had retired, two are students who also work part time, one is a registered nurse, and two hold management positions -- one in a charitable agency and the other in a major corporation. In order not to endanger or inhibit the fragile rapport that must be maintained as part of the participant observation process, questions about annual income were omitted.

Religious Affiliation.

The interviews revealed a broad range of respondents' religious experiences. All of the female respondents, including one convert, are Catholic. However, many of the women had spent time critically

examining the meaning of Catholicism in their lives and experimented with other religious options. They reported participating in the gay and lesbian Christian denomination, Metropolitan Community Church. Two of the women also stated that they had also practised post-Christian religious rituals -- crystal and goddess worship -- as part of their involvement in the feminist movement. Four of the male participants reported that they were not baptized Catholics. One individual regards Roman Catholicism as a "phenomena" that he feels attracted to because of his interest in academic research." An Episcopalian male who considers himself a Roman Catholic participates because "...Christianity is episcopal and [our] beliefs are similar."¹ A male Episcopalian liturgical musician expressed kinship with Dignity and with Roman Catholicism because of the time he spends working as a musician in Catholic parishes." Another male reported that he joined Dignity because he hoped "...to meet Dignity members...[and] enjoy Dignity's social and spiritual activities. One respondent reported that he

¹ Tape Male #3, transcript, 23.

² Tape Male #5, transcript, 39.

³ Tape Male #6, transcript, 77.

eventually joined because so many bar people¹³ he knew respected Dignity because of [their] loving, caring, [and] sharing."¹⁴

In or Out of the Closet.

Male members' willingness to share information about their sexual orientation with others -- the degree to which the individuals conduct their lives in or out of the closet -- varied considerably. At one end of this continuum, some males reported that they concealed completely their sexual orientation from all but the most trusted friends and relatives. A few male respondents enjoyed, for all practical purposes, lives of complete openness with the majority of their friends, family and employers. All of the women felt that they were out of the closet to some extent. One woman reported that only a very few members of her family knew. All of the other women who reported that family and close friends knew about their sexual orientation. Only two of the women said they had told their employers and co-workers about their sexual orientation.

¹³ 'Bar people' is a reference to those who participate in the subculture of the gay and lesbian bars and other sources of night life.

¹⁴ Tape Male #17, transcript, 142.

Participation in Other Organizations.

A number of the respondents in the research project reported active participation in various gay organizations including groups supportive of patients with AIDS. The respondents also belonged to many well known groups that focus on gay and lesbian civil rights and similar issues as well as the Society of Gay and Lesbian Anthropologists, Evangelicals Concerned, Integrity, and Gay Alcoholics Anonymous. Participants also reported involvement in organizations that do not focus on gay and lesbian issues. These included state, local, and national political parties and social action organizations, a Christian psychological association, Alcoholics Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Overeaters Anonymous and MENSA. The respondents' participation in these organizations may indicate a willingness to work for the betterment of others. Also, the respondents seem to want to attend to the work needed to put their lives in order and, thus, to achieve greater self-respect.

Level of Participation in Dignity.

Individual male respondents' level of participation in the three Dignity chapters ranged from irregular attendance to a commitment of many hours of their free time every week to help out with the organization. They serve on committees, volunteer for activities such as helping with refreshments, acting as Eucharistic ministers, lectors, or commentators at Dignity Masses. Six of the male respondents have held or presently hold office in their local Dignity chapters.

The female respondents reported similar variations in levels of activity. One woman reported only a minimal involvement because of her profound feelings of anger with both Dignity and the Church at large. She stated that she is opposed to investing any time or energy in structures that she describes as male-dominated. However, this woman's anger did not preclude her from pressuring other women to increase their level of activity and commitment to Dignity.⁷ This same woman reported irregular attendance at the Sunday liturgy.⁸ Three of the other women either had

⁷ Field Notes; 16 April, 23 April 1989.

⁸ Tape Female #2, transcript, 177.

served as officers or as committee chairpersons. With one exception, all of the women had participated in the liturgies to some degree during the research period, serving as acolytes, lectors, commentators, or Eucharistic Ministers.

On the surface, irregular participation and attendance at Dignity liturgies might seem to indicate a member's disinterest in the organization. However, this may not be the case. In the course of the research, it soon became apparent that, for some of the participants, even irregular attendance at liturgies or social events was difficult. For them, even occasional attendance involves a serious commitment of a large block of time and energy each week. These men and women travel some two hours from their home towns or suburbs to a Dignity meeting in another city. This is particularly true in Michigan and Ohio. The membership for the three chapters whose members were involved in the study includes individuals from as far north as the central Michigan city of Lansing, to as far south as central Ohio. In addition, a number of members risk encounters with immigration officials as they journey north to the U.S. from cities and towns in southern Ontario.

Most male respondents said they had participated in Dignity for a period of time ranging from two to six years. One, however, has maintained his membership for twelve years. The newest member to take part in the survey had joined only four months before the research interview occurred. Women had maintained membership for periods of time ranging from four months to fifteen years.

Respondents' Experiences in Local Parishes.

Just as the literature review established that many gay and lesbian people encounter hostility and rejection at the parish level, the interviews confirmed that many of the respondents turned to Dignity some time after their negative experiences in their local parishes.

Only three of the male respondents have remained active in their local parishes. On the other hand, other respondents reported election or appointment to vicariate, diocesan or archdiocesan committees or councils -- responsibilities that would have demanded intense involvement at the parish level. A middle-aged respondent reported that he found himself barely clinging to his religion because, during his late teens and early twenties, not only was he condemned for his

sexual orientation, but a priest advised him to avoid any contact with other gay men and to remain celibate. This man was told to date and to fall in love with a woman as a cure for homosexuality.⁹ The respondent did meet someone, and dated her regularly, hoping to fall in love. He recalls:

It didn't work....I didn't want to break this poor girl's heart. She was beautiful. I finally broke up with her. She sufferedShe was very, very broken....For me it was painful because I hurt her.¹⁰

Another male described parish life this way:

[My spiritual life without Dignity] was less fulfilling because [I was] not at home or accepted in a regular parish. I felt like an outsider and I knew that if they knew about my [sexual] orientation, I would not be accepted.¹¹

A divorced respondent recalled an encounter with his parish priest that occurred about a decade ago. The respondent had sought counselling when he first acknowledged his gayness and realized that his sexual orientation was threatening his marriage. He reports:

I was active in the parish up to the time of my divorce. The pastor was unsympathetic when I revealed my gayness. He only compounded matters. This priest was

⁹ Tape Male #10, transcript, 51.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tape Male #16, transcript, 137.

alcoholic and gay and homophobic. He told my wife I was sick and sinful. Later, I was shunned, so I left the parish for Dignity.¹⁸

Another respondent left the Church at age twenty-three, only to return to Catholicism later through Dignity. This person reported that he had left the Church for a year and a half because he felt he could never be a part of a family-oriented parish. He also said that he felt that there was no place for a sexually active gay or lesbian person in such a parish. He reported that he never encountered any motivation or concern expressed for him or others in his parish who were not raising children. Further, this man felt a void in his spiritual life when he fully realized that he couldn't change his sexual orientation. At this point, he recalls, the full impact of the Church's condemnation of homosexual acts settled into his psyche.¹⁹

A male who served as a lector in a suburban parish reported that he joined the Catholic charismatic movement. During this period, he felt that his sexuality was negatively affected because of the movement's emphasis on celibacy. In his parish, he

¹⁸ Tape Male #18, transcript, 147.

¹⁹ Tape Male #14, transcript, 67.

carefully avoided any reference to his sexual orientation because he feared social ostracism.¹⁴

Another man reported intense involvement in liturgical planning in his parish in addition to involvement at other levels of church administration. He stated:

Until Dignity, my spiritual life was separate from the part of me that was gay, which didn't have much of a spiritual side. The non-gay [part of me] attended church, received the sacraments, and [took part in] the family and community life [of the parish]. It was like I was two separate people.¹⁵

Some respondents finally achieved a sense of balance in their spiritual lives when they decided to simply avoid the Sacrament of Reconciliation. A middle-aged woman reported that she stopped going to confession when she was twenty-seven years old because she no longer considered same-sex genital acts as sinful. Her attempts to conform to Church teaching had created too many inner conflicts. She explains:

Before...I just...did what the rule books called for, I didn't argue and I didn't question. That's where I was having a problem. The Catholic faith said, "Hey, what are you doing with that lesbian lover of yours? You're not supposed to be doing that."

¹⁴ Tape Male #15, transcript, 71.

¹⁵ Tape Male #6, transcript, 105.

You're going straight to Hell." I didn't believe it for a minute. However, I wanted to keep going to this church, but I didn't want the Church telling me I was going to Hell when I brought it up....I'm not going to confess it any more. I just don't see it as a sin.¹⁶

A woman describes as "powerful" her experiences as a member of a Black Catholic parish. Laity were encouraged to "co-celebrate" with the priest at the altar. However, her relationship with that parish turned sour when she turned to the pastor for guidance in dealing with her sexual orientation. She recalls:

I remember sharing with him [the pastor] at a retreat that I was gay and it was, like, who cares. Not who cares good, either. Just, let's not talk about it. I felt so incomplete. It was like "we can't deal with it." There is so much prejudice thrown on [Blacks] that they can't deal with problems other people have. They can't see that it's hard for us as gay people....It's not just Blacks, I've seen a lot of people who just can't deal with the fact that you're gay...it just wouldn't be talked about.¹⁷

This woman regarded friends' denial of her sexual orientation as particularly painful. She reports that she perceived friends' rejection of the reality of her sexual orientation, as a rejection of her as a person. She also feels that, in a mixed group, gay and lesbian

¹⁶ Tape Female #1, transcript, 167.

¹⁷ Tape Female #3, transcript, 198.

people are expected to spend hours talking about heterosexuals' children, lovers, or spouses, with no mutual reciprocity in the social interactions:

You can spend...three hours talking about somebody's kid, or what you're doing at school. But...no one asks how you and your lover are getting along or [if you're] feeling good together.¹¹⁹

It is important to realize that not all of the respondents only reported negative experiences in their relationships with their local parishes. Many of the respondents reported positive experiences. Consequently, these respondents have contributed their time and talents to their local parish. It is interesting to note that all those who reported these positive experiences held office or some leadership position in their chapter and in their parish at the time of the interviews or in the past. A male reports not only a perceived attitude of acceptance in his contacts with the Church, but actual cooperation in making contact with Dignity:

I knew [that] if I called the diocese, I could get information about Dignity, and so I did....I never felt alienated. I never felt bad [about] my being gay. A part of accepting my gayness has been through the Church. Some have been alienated through the Church. I can't relate to that because I

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

came out through the Church. I came out through Dignity.¹⁷

One officer feels that his participation in Dignity's Sunday Mass actually duplicates his work in his local parish where he serves as a lector, eucharistic minister, commentator, and parish council member.¹⁸ His experience, which closely parallels McNaught's pre-coming out struggle¹⁹ to present a perfect front to all those he encountered, is reflected in this statement:

All my experiences in the Church have been very positive...The people I worked with closest...including the pastor, were told I was gay because there was a point in my life where I was killing myself living up to the expectation that I was a saint, a goody-two-shoes image. So I told them because I wanted to be myself and not have to try to prove anything to anyone. One woman [in the parish whom he told] was in tears. Her sister is lesbian and she was so glad I had the confidence in her to tell her. I've been blessed as far as that [reaction] is concerned.²⁰

One member, in fact, chose to convert to Roman

¹⁷ Paper Male #2, interview notes, 4.

¹⁸ Tape Male #9, transcript, 108.

¹⁹ Brian McNaught On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith, and Love Stonewall Inn Editions, gen. ed. Michael Denny (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 5-14.

²⁰ Tape Male #9, transcript, 112-113.

Catholicism as a part of his coming out process. This is a reversal of a sequence of events that, according to the interview data in this project, all too frequently sees Catholics leaving the Church because they cannot reconcile their sexuality with Church teaching.

At the time of my entry into the Church, I was dealing with the whole issue of sexuality. I came out, and had my first sexual experience a year later. I came to the Church....in 1973 that was progressive, and made up of people willing to act on their faith. I never felt oppressed, although I describe myself as a cafeteria Catholic, and Dignity is a very important part of my life.¹²³

B. Patterns of Meaning.

The interview data were used to evaluate the significance of Dignity in the lives of its members. An open-ended interview format that concerned several aspects of individuals' involvement in Dignity and the influence they felt Dignity exerted on their lives was used. Several patterns emerged during the course of the examination of the members' responses to the interview questions that revealed Dignity's meaning to the study participants. Consequently, the interview data presented in this chapter have been arranged to

¹²³ Tape Male #12, transcript, 62.

reflect these various categories of meaning that consistently appeared in the individual members' autobiographies. These categories include: (1) acceptance; (2) community: sought or found; (3) Dignity as a source of assistance during the coming out process; (4) social aspects; (5) noticeable positive changes; (6) support; (7) spirituality or religiosity; and (8) Dignity as a source of healing.

Acceptance.

When seeking to overcome the pain and rejection experienced at the local parish, a number of respondents reported that they found they were able to meet their need for acceptance and belonging in Dignity. As discussed earlier, acceptance is a critical factor necessary for the growth and normal development of the human personality.

The full realization of the kind of openness and freedom that exists in Dignity and cannot exist, at the present time, in a parish defines for some members the value of Dignity in their lives.

Sunday liturgies are really nice. We reaffirm each other that we are good people...loved by God....This could not happen either in my suburban home parish or....where I work because of my somewhat secret existence. I wouldn't risk

exposure.¹⁷⁴

The strongest image of acceptance was articulated in a description by a female respondent who said:

Dignity is like a mother, gathering her children around her. The Church should be like that....Jesus...didn't come for the people that are well....Christ's message wasn't for sexual purity as it was for loving one another and caring for one another...The more pious they are, the more superior they feel, the further they get from Jesus' message.¹⁷⁵

A male who is not sexually active explained what it is like to be included in Dignity:

[In Dignity] you feel like a part of something. Like you belong. That's important for me because I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere...I finally found some place where I'm comfortable, that accepts me and I accept them. The people that I've met, that I've made a friendship with are so important to me after not having friends for so long. They accept me, and for me, having a problem with intimacy, you're not hitting on me all the time, that's a big relief.¹⁷⁶

The respondents perceive, in Dignity, both the human and the divine aspects of acceptance:

Finding Dignity was for me finding the solution and the answer. It's like God accepted me the way I am...finally, I found a big family that doesn't matter if I'm a fag or a queen or whatever. They love me the way

¹⁷⁴ Tape Male #16, transcript, 138.

¹⁷⁵ Tape Female #5, transcript, 214.

¹⁷⁶ Tape Male #1, transcript, 10.

I am. I can pray with all these others in the way that I am. I don't have to put up a front."¹⁷

Giving and receiving this precious gift of acceptance by other human beings is accomplished through repeated interpersonal interactions between old and new members. It is passed on by the general Dignity membership to all, even those who are just visiting. A former Dignity officer recalled how he found acceptance in the group by volunteering to help one of the council members. He said:

I was on [this member's] committee. I helped him. I was here with him a lot when he...put a lot of work into [Holy Trinity's community centre]. It was an outlet for him and...sometimes...he would talk to me like a normal person. And it helped me to feel accepted by him. And then I would meet other people who accepted me, not on a sexual level. That was such a relief for me."¹⁸

In the newcomer to Dignity, this acceptance by others seems to facilitate, in turn, the process of self-acceptance:

What [Dignity] has done for a lot of people, makes them comfortable with themselves. It has said to people, "You are acceptable in the eyes of God and the Church...[you are] good people who feel good about themselves." That's the important thing Dignity does. It allows people to accept themselves where they

¹⁷ Tape Male #2, transcript, 15.

¹⁸ Tape Male #1, transcript, 5.

are because there is an organization that doesn't condemn them. Some of them want, and are, part of the Church. They want to be Catholics. Here they can be Catholics and love and accept themselves.⁶²

Acceptance for several of the members involved, specifically, the acquaintances and friendships with priest celebrants and members.

The positive effect of relationships with the clergy has helped me to accept my self, my gayness, and the Catholic faith and how they could be integrated....The clergy support us -- but we are a great support for the clergy who are gay.⁶³

This acceptance provided a sharp contrast to this man's experiences in his local parish. "People," he said, "are immediately accepting. It's not like going to a normal Catholic Church service where everybody went, but never said anything and left."⁶⁴

Community: Sought or Found.

Dignity members find themselves articulating an awareness that acceptance by other Dignity members signals their inclusion into what they define either as community or family, as one man explains:

I can be among people who share the same feelings, thoughts and ideas about sexuality

⁶² Tape Male 10, transcript, 52.

⁶³ Tape Male #8, transcript, 103.

⁶⁴ Tape Male #10, transcript, 49.

...it's not threatening, [it's] an easy feeling.⁹²

One respondent, explaining how his life in Dignity had changed because he was no longer a solitary person, stated:

[The big difference in my life has been] people with whom I can share a spiritual search, people with common experiences that strengthen our own faith. Being a Dignity member, at times, when one feels at the end of one's rope, one can remember that there are more Dignity members out there, that we're really a family and that there are, out there, others going through the same thing you are. That's a way of getting you out of a bad situation that looks desperate.⁹³

One of the lesbian women reports that she and her lover joined Dignity specifically because they were having difficulty coming to terms with their sexual orientation:

Up until that point I knew I was a lesbian but I hadn't really firmly said, "I'm a lesbian"....I always thought I would meet a man and be saved....Dignity has done a lot to help me accept my sexuality and to feel good about who I am and not to feel ashamed or an outcast or a deviant or a pervert....to this day I feel very loved by the group itself.⁹⁴

One male formerly belonged to two large parishes - his and his parents' -- in different suburbs.

⁹² Tape Male #14, transcript, 67.

⁹³ Tape Male #13, transcript, 132.

⁹⁴ Tape Female #1, transcript, 158, 160.

Eventually, he abandoned his active role in both parishes. In retrospect, he contrasts Dignity with these parish experiences:

I didn't feel in touch [in the parishes]. I was losing heart going to church. With Dignity, I can have my spirituality...I can go to church and be among gays and lesbians. It's kinda like a community...it's a once-a-week recharge. I joined to feel at home in a community in a church atmosphere.³¹⁵

[Dignity] put me...into a Christian community where I have things in common with [others]. This gives me a context in which to experience myself, other people, [while] encountering questions, [and] formulating answers. It's provoked my thinking.³¹⁶

One of the men and one of the women perceive this sense of community in terms of a safe haven, saying:

Dignity provides a safe place where I can be encouraged by other gays who are involved in worship and spiritual activity.³¹⁷

The female describes the safe haven of Dignity:

[It's a] safe place to come and not feel odd. [We] could romance in the church if we wanted to. To be with other gays and lesbians with no ridicule...is a validating statement: "I'm gay, these people are gay and we're celebrating Mass" It's a positive thing. I feel worse off if I don't come.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ Tape Male #4, transcript, 29-30.

³¹⁶ Tape Male #6, transcript, 85.

³¹⁷ Tape Male #5, transcript, 40.

³¹⁸ Tape Female #3, transcript, 196.

The awareness of family or community extends to Dignity members in other chapters, so that some individuals visit other chapters when travelling.³⁷ Frequently, the heavily involved study participants also describe the regional HOD meetings as an experience of extended family.³⁸

Assistance During the Coming Out Process.

As discussed earlier, the coming out process is a significant and frequently traumatic event in the lives of gay and lesbian persons. The literature revealed that Dignity played a role in the coming out process of a number of individuals. The interview data also shows that many of the respondents reported that Dignity had, to some degree, facilitated their coming out. In fact, some of the respondents consider their membership in Dignity a critical -- and positive -- part of their coming out experience.

This is exemplified in the biography of one male respondent who stated that he learned about Dignity/Detroit through a friend who was a member of a Dignity chapter in another major city. He recounts his fears when first attending. "I didn't go to communion

³⁷ Tape Female #1, transcript, 160.

³⁸ Tape Male #11, transcript, 124.

the first two times. I didn't want to be seen." It took this man several tries before he could attend the social for the first time. When he finally succeeded in joining the crowd for the social, he could only stay for a few minutes. Eventually, though, as a result of his attendance, though, this man made a friend who served as a mentor, guided his gradual entrance into Detroit's gay and lesbian community. The new mentor and friend told him which restaurants and bars and businesses the gay and lesbian community patronized. His mentor took him to some of these places, until he felt comfortable enough to go on his own. The mentor also served as a source of information, providing basic information that would help this newcomer to feel at home within this community that would gradually become more important to him as he become more comfortable with his gay identity."¹

Young heterosexuals do not have to go out of their way to find similar information they need to adapt to the straight culture because it is passed on through the family. However, gay and lesbian people have to struggle to acquire their history and codes of conduct almost individually, unless they find a supporting

¹ Male Interview #4, interview notes, 1-2.

community such as Dignity.

Other members' recollections of their first encounters with Dignity underscore McNeill's findings that Dignity does, indeed, play an important part in the coming out process of some individuals. For instance, one male explained why he called a halt to his extensive involvement in heterosexual parishes. He reported that he did not withdraw because of a negative experiences. He stated that he felt that his needs as a gay person simply exceeded the resources found in the milieu of a traditional parish. He said:

Joining Dignity coincided with my own acceptance of [my] sexuality. When I was going to church elsewhere, there was a missing ingredient, the feeling of belonging somewhere, but I couldn't put my finger on it. So, I was going to church and not feeling a part of it. Dignity helped me with accepting myself because there are role models for me in Dignity. [I like] the fact that it [Dignity] is an accepting community and that I can meet a broad spectrum of people who do all kinds of work. And for me, it kind of normalizes my sexuality. Whereas I might feel out of place in a regular church, I don't here. It's important in seeing that gays and lesbians have normal lives. It [Dignity] was a normal atmosphere to come to...it helped me accept myself and also it has shown me that you can talk to someone....it helps me normalize the whole thing so I don't feel strange about my sexuality or that it's odd. [At Dignity] we're in a normal situation."²²

²² Tape Male #4, transcription, 30-31.

A former charismatic stated that he felt that Dignity "meets a need when [you're] coming out because your [same sex] relationship is recognized and valued."⁴³ Another respondent notes the continuity of members that constitutes an effective network that incorporates newcomers. Eventually he, too, became part of Dignity and this network. The male states, "I have come a long way in accepting my sexuality and I can help others who are dealing with the same problems."⁴⁴

Social Aspects.

In the interviews, several respondents said they rely on Dignity to fill a number of basic social needs. Dignity offers a space where individuals carrying the common thread of sexual orientation can meet, pray together, and just have fun together in "...a place of brotherhood, a place of sisterhood..."⁴⁵ A non-Catholic respondent thinks of Dignity as providing "...a place to meet gay Christians."⁴⁶ A Catholic male attends Dignity retreats and social events because they

⁴³ Tape Male #15, transcript, 70.

⁴⁴ Tape Male #15, transcript, 73.

⁴⁵ Tape Male #13, transcript, 130.

⁴⁶ Tape Male #6, transcript, 76.

"...enable [me] to get close to a fine group of people."⁴⁷

A common response to the question about "most treasured memories" was the reply that the respondents especially valued Dignity's social aspects: the friendships and relationships initiated and maintained in Dignity. One woman stated that she cherished the friendships she made in Dignity more than anything else. "I've met some wonderful, dear people that are closer to me than my blood family."⁴⁸

Many members differentiate the social opportunities Dignity provides from the primary forum that gay and lesbian people utilize to meet other new gay and lesbian people -- the gay bar scene. These respondents explained:

When I joined Dignity, I only knew it was a group of gays who gathered to go to Mass and meet people. I didn't know what it was about. Dignity was part of my coming out process. Not being a bar person, I did not know or have many opportunities to meet gays. Dignity has brought me farther in four years than the prior seven to eight years when I initially began coming out. It gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of gay and lesbian people in a context out of a bar, where you only have one kind of a relationship. You

⁴⁷ Tape Male #17, transcript, 143.

⁴⁸ Tape Female #1, transcript, 166.

can't establish friendships in the bar scene.⁴²

It's [Dignity is] a great context to meet people in. You're meeting a whole person rather than going to a bar. Here, [at Dignity] you meet people because they're talking to people you know and that's the way to meet people. Cruising you do alone. Rather than my need for sociability and conviviality, it's been my need for mating that takes me cruising. Here, people are talking to each other. You don't see people standing by themselves. People get involved.⁴³

People come here to meet those they have something in common with...If there wasn't Dignity, the only thing left is the bar scene. That's O.K. I've met lots of people [there]. But no one to form a relationship with. Also, the bar scene can be real rough. What's in common with those you meet in a bar?⁴⁴

One woman, who is not now involved in a particular parish, attends the Dignity Mass whenever possible, despite her feelings of anger towards the sexism she sees in the chapter. She says:

One thing I like at Dignity...is that I know more people at Dignity than I do [elsewhere] ...there is a real warm feeling when I go down to church. And when I go [elsewhere], I know maybe three or four people...[who] show up once in a while, but I don't really know many people at [other parishes], so when I go there, I just come and go. There is very

⁴² Tape Male #8, transcript, 103.

⁴³ Tape Male #12, transcript, 60.

⁴⁴ Male Interview #4, interview notes, 7.

little communication. [At Dignity] I can say hello to friends.⁵⁰²

However, not all the respondents believed that Dignity's social aspects enrich their lives. A few of the respondents reported that, initially, they had walked away from Dignity because they encountered unwanted -- and apparently unexpected -- sexual advances. Other respondents stated that they joined Dignity searching for a more meaningful religious experience. They complained that they felt that there was too much emphasis on socializing. They charged that the chapter leadership and the membership tolerate cruising during liturgies.⁵⁰³

One young respondent vividly recalled the difference in the way he was treated by the members at two different stages in his life. He describes himself, when he first joined, as overweight and unattractive -- and ignored. After a period of self-improvement he joined again. He was astonished at the way members reacted to him. Although he does feel flattered by the attention he receives, it also fills him with anger when he thinks about his first visits to

⁵⁰² Tape Female #2, transcript, 181.

⁵⁰³ Tape Male #18, transcript, 147.

Dignity. He recalls:

I was not greeted and treated well. Meanwhile, my appearance improved and the same people who snubbed me earlier now fawned on me and this upset me."⁴

Another member recalls:

I got scared off [at first]. I was groped during the Kiss of Peace when we were all standing around the altar. It was a sexual advance and I thought it was improper sanctuary conduct."⁵

Noticeable Growth.

Some respondents measure Dignity's influence on their lives by the changes they have observed in their outlook, attitudes, or behaviour since they joined. One respondent, a former officer, recalls that when he first joined Dignity, he was shy and withdrawn. Today, he is an outgoing and respected member of the community. Others at Dignity often turn to him for advice."⁶ Another member, who also successfully ran for office, has lost 115 pounds. He said:

[Dignity has helped me] just to accept myself and to accept others. When I started, I weighed 289 pounds. In the whole process of accepting myself, I have learned to take care of myself and do good things. I lost weight in a sane and sensible manner...I've grown

⁴ Tape Male #5, transcript, 40.

⁵ Tape Male #8, transcript, 102.

⁶ Tape Male #1, transcript, 4.

emotionally. My first love affair with a man was through Dignity. It meant a lot of struggle and pain. I never felt that before. Now I know what people talk about when they talk about being in love.⁵²⁷

However, other patterns of personal growth strike the beneficiaries as profound, if not always noticeable to friends, acquaintances and family.

Dignity...has been a turning point. At first, I started to feel good about myself and to value my complete self, not just my sexuality. I could like myself and see myself as good and not feel guilty about that...before, it was all I could do not to think about men -- especially when around one who I was attracted to, because I believed it was a sin. Once I said, "That's O.K. to be attracted to other men," it has freed me to have good relationships with other men.⁵²⁸

Dignity as a Support Group.

Some respondents acknowledged that they value Dignity because of the acceptance, community, social and religious needs it meets. They also view Dignity as a type of peer support group that provides affirmation and personal strengths that help the individual cope with the world outside of Dignity. In one case, this support involved surviving the divorce process.⁵²⁹ Another member explains how he based

⁵²⁷ Male Interview #4, interview notes, 6-7.

⁵²⁸ Tape Male #5, transcript, 42.

⁵²⁹ Tape Male #18, transcript, 146.

further attempts at networking with other gay men at work on the social skills he acquired at Dignity. He said:

I joined because I needed a new outlook -- a support group and to meet other people.⁶⁰ Dignity has given me a support group of peers that I have a lot in common with, whether we acknowledged it or not, not only sexual [commonalities] but religious. [Now] I'm on the [Gay] Pride Committee and three of us work at the same auto plant. You find all these common threads and the more you deal with people, the more you find out about 'em and you continuously expand your support group, your network of friends.⁶¹

This is corroborated by an officer in a different chapter, who feels that Dignity gives him the support he needs to remain within the Church.

Dignity serves a support function...there are people whose faith is dangerously on a string and they are about to lose faith. If you go deep enough, to find out what's really going on, you find out that they really believe in God...in all the basic truths of Catholicism...the problem is that they've been kicked so hard by the hierarchy...and discriminated against, that they fight hard to separate the real Church from the administration or governing part of the organization.⁶²

Dignity: A Provider of Healing.

One group of respondents seem to have found more

⁶⁰ Tape Male #9, transcript, 108.

⁶¹ Tape Male #9, transcript, 119.

⁶² Tape Male #13, transcript, 133.

solace and reinforcement from their ties with Dignity than any other. This group consists of those who have suffered abuse of some kind. Initially, a few respondents reported that they began attending Dignity because of friendships formed either in Alcoholics Anonymous or Gay Alcoholics Anonymous. When several respondents spontaneously reported instances of physical, sexual and psychological abuse by parents, by male and female religious, and in one instance by a spouse, a question about abuse and alcoholism was inserted into subsequent interviews. Some of the respondents spoke of the pain inflicted by an alcoholic parent.

One respondent stated that, as he came to his earliest realization that he was gay, he had to face other painful realities: that he was also both the child of an alcoholic and an incest survivor. As a result of beatings and incest, he has had to address the fact that he is afraid of men. In his interview, he described flashbacks. He states that he believes he survived because he developed multiple personalities that may blur the memories of when his drunken dad "...ruined everything." This man feels that participation in Dignity has helped heal many of his

psychological wounds. He says:

Being involved, doing things has helped me...To get involved, I started doing physical things [at the Dignity social to help out like] rinsing out [pop] cans. People would hang around and talk to you while they were helping you and you were helping them. And it was the working together that [brought] back [the feeling that we were together] like family -- only Dad wasn't there to ruin everything....A lot of people are like me. And they came out later in life or they come out in a different way. We don't know how to socialize, we only know how to sexualize....Just to sit with somebody and talk on a non-sexual, non-threatening level is something we've got to learn. And a lot of us didn't learn how in puberty because we were expected to fulfil roles and we went overboard.⁶³

This man faced difficult tasks. In learning how to cope, he relied on groups such as Al Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics. He describes some of the ways he coped:

Al Anon...helped me to define my spirituality and then I came to understand that Dignity is one of the ways that I express my spirituality. Not the only way. I feel that personally, for me, there is a myriad of ways that I express my spirituality.Dignity has given me a way to express my spirituality and Adult Children of Alcoholics was showing me who I was, that I could accept myself and that I could be proud to be gay and Catholic and a member of Dignity.⁶⁴

This respondent may well have coped with the

⁶³ Transcript, 11.

⁶⁴ Transcript, 3-4.

continuing memories of pain and rejection with involvement in Dignity. However, over the years, his realization of Dignity's relationship to the Church may have caused additional pain, and may have added to the feelings of rejection he is trying to overcome. The question then arises if the images and memories of an abusive parent the injured child yearns to love are not somehow deeply linked with the images these respondents hold of the Church. Some of that imagery is present as this respondent speaks of the Church that does not embrace its gay and lesbian children. He says:

When I first joined Dignity I thought ...the Catholic Church was [sponsoring] this organization, and they want you to be Catholic and they'll accept you because you're gay...I realized this year...that the Church does not have us. We may be Catholics, but the Catholic Church does not embrace us....We are not part of this Church...One day the Church will embrace gays and lesbians and say, "Come back, we were wrong,"...Damn it, it should because we are good, worthy people and we should be included. We are the Church. Not the buildings."

Another male spent many years in a boarding school operated by priests. While there, he was subjected to repeated sexual abuse. He states:

My uncle was a priest -- my first love. I seduced my uncle, but I was brought up by

" Transcript, 7-8.

him. I often spent time with my uncle in seminary...[and after his] ordination. I was in seminary but dropped out because of my gayness. I call Dignity my family, my people. I have no other family in this country. I was brought up for 10 years in a Jesuit boarding school. Age 6-16. In that boarding school, homosexual sex was not a sin. It was very much practised. Among the priests. And with the students. If we wanted 'A' grades, you better be nice to the priest when he came into your room. If he asked you to take your pants off, you better take 'em off. And that was routine, So when the Pope comes up to me and tells me that I am a sinner, he has to prove to me that he's not a sinner, because the boys were innocent ...I'm uncomfortable with it when the Pope starts talking that we are sinners, that we are wrong. "6

Another respondent started attending Dignity to see more of his people he had met through Gay Alcoholics Anonymous. At present, his lover is serving time on charges of homosexual rape. He describe his background this way:

Both my mother and father were gay. I was raised in a three-adult household. All three were gay. My mother's mother was also gay. All these people were married. So marriage wasn't terribly unusual....My father died of [alcoholism]...I know my father's sister has described to one of my daughters what I think my father's sister felt was abuse...My father didn't like me, was the way I kinda phrased it. [He hit] me only in normal punishment circumstances. He did not care for me [and my] non-macho personality. He was very much

"6 Transcript, 18-19.

in the leather group himself.⁶⁷

Another male describes how the other members of his chapter helped him to overcome the effects of psychological abuse. He says:

My father was an abusive parent....if someone did something wrong, he beat all four of us to make sure he got the right one....[For a long time] I hated everything in the world. And I could tell you in no uncertain terms every thing and every one I hated. And someone said, "How long are you going to carry that heavy load...it'll keep getting heavier"...I thought about that for a long time and I decided I no longer wanted to do that. And Dignity has enabled me to get rid of a lot of negative feelings that I have. And our chapter has been very, very supportive of me. We're a very affectionate group.⁶⁸

Another male stated:

My father is an active alcoholic. There was no physical abuse, but heavy psychological abuse. It affects you no matter how you distance yourself from it because their attitude is so different with their drinking. It affects their lives so greatly and it controls their lives and, in a way, it controls you. You adopt a different role than you would otherwise as a child in a non-alcoholic family. I was never physically beaten, but I think the psychological mess was great. Dignity has just helped [me] to see that there are other men, and women who have accepted themselves and have lived through it.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Transcript, 27

⁶⁸ Transcript, 321.

⁶⁹ Transcript, 36-37.

One woman suffered from physical, sexual and psychological abuse. She describes herself as "a battered child," and tells how her parents told their friends that she was unwanted. They told her, at the age of three, that she was "...damned to hell" for ruining her mother's life. She recalls calling out to her mother to stop her stepfather from abusing her:

It is so hard for kids to say anything about it [abuse]. We don't know what terminology to use. What to say. I can remember perfectly. I screamed for my mother. And she said, "If you want to talk to me, come out to the kitchen." Well, I couldn't, he was holding me...When I was eleven, I finally told my mother [about the abuse], but she didn't believe me. When I was thirteen, she married this man...then she found him in the bedroom with his hands under the covers. So she got him out of there and bawled me out. [She said] I was trying to ruin her life."²⁰

She explains how Dignity has helped her:

I have a lot of friends [at Dignity] I like men fine, I'm just not sexually attracted to 'em. I think I was chased by too many penises when I was a kid. [My uncle] wasn't the only one to try and make out with me. And I was so proud of saying "no."²¹

²⁰ Transcript, 324-328.

²¹ Transcript, 329.

Religious Aspects.

Members use Dignity as a means to satisfy a variety of religious needs. Some traditional Catholics feel the Sunday Night liturgy in Detroit fills the mandatory Church obligation requiring Catholics to celebrate with their community. On the other hand, others cherish Dignity because of moments during the liturgy when they become aware of "...unity and community" in the worship act.⁷⁰

One officer has observed individuals using Dignity as a vehicle either to maintain a relationship with the Church or to rebuild a relationship shattered by some of the negative experiences discussed earlier.

[Dignity best serves] not people like me who come to Dignity with an established spiritual life, but those who are coming back to the Church after years and years. And here, finally, [they] have found some place where they have felt comfortable [enough] to enter into the life of the church.⁷¹

After exploring several other religious traditions, including Eastern mysticism, one woman who had converted to Catholicism and subsequently left the Church stated that belonging to Dignity gave her the feeling that she could, once again, be Catholic. In

⁷⁰ Tape Male #6, transcript, 6.

⁷¹ Tape Male #8, transcript, 106.

essence, she returned to the Church through Dignity, which affords her the opportunity to be a practising Catholic while continuing an ongoing search for religious and philosophical truth.⁷⁴

Women: Minority Presence Within a Minority.

It is difficult to explain why more women either do not participate in Dignity, or attend once or twice and never return. A group of women that the researcher encountered in preliminary field work attended, in a body, one Dignity Mass during the course of the study. A number of the individual women in the group privately expressed support for Dignity as an organization. Some of the women appeared to fear overt participation in any group with a gay or lesbian identity. In conversation, the individual women also stated that they greatly feared exposure as lesbians because exposure of their sexual orientation might affect their employment, professional standing, or custody of their children.

However, other dynamics that explain the paucity of female participation in Dignity may be operative, and these factors are evident in the reaction of this particular group of women to the research project.

⁷⁴ Tape Female #4, transcript, 210.

These factors include a fear of exposure that borders on paranoia, the desire to maintain a controlled group that holds the power to approve or reject potential participants, and a very real elitism that seems to isolate these women from other, more open, factions of the gay and lesbian community. For instance, one woman, in cancelling an appointment for an interview, stated:

I am not like those people at Dignity. They don't care about themselves. I am a professional...and must maintain relationships with many women who are professionals.²⁵

Reaction to sexism and the negative effects of dealing with an all-male power structure surfaced throughout the course of the research project. In fact, during the time in which the interviews with the women took place, the Dignity / Detroit leadership addressed one woman's complaint that Dignity itself was perpetrating sexism through a lack of inclusive language, the use of women in the liturgy as tokens, and inappropriate representation of women in the liturgy. These complaints surfaced after Dignity/Detroit's mass celebrating the chapter's fifteenth anniversary.

²⁵ Journal notes, June 1989.

An angry telephone call resulted in a meeting between the chapter president and a number of the women. The meeting was called to allow women to voice their concerns and to then find ways to make changes if needed. As a result of the discussion, a women's concern committee was formed. When a newly elected vice president spiritual director took office during the summer, he was able to work with the women and slowly to begin to use inclusive language in scripture readings, and where possible, in other prayers and hymns.

While the chapter leadership was struggling with the challenges presented by the women, two events highlighted the struggle of women within the Dignity structure, and also show how, in a short period of time, the attitudes of the dominant group -- males -- may have changed. The Region V HOD convened in Ann Arbor in May. A line item on the agenda included discussions on attempts by the membership to decide how to meet the needs of women. Dignity's national vice president, a female, listened attentively as a the male representative of chapters in the four-state area explained what they felt upset women. Interestingly enough, the men's opinions took precedence. The

chairperson seemed hesitant to recognize women, although the discussion centred on their needs. That evening, the delegates participated in Mass. The Mass was concelebrated by a Catholic gay male priest and an Episcopalian woman priest. At the national convention in San Francisco, delegates voted on two slates of officers that met the Dignity/USA's requirement for gender parity. The Mass at the national convention was also concelebrated by a male and a female priest. When the Region V HOD reconvened in Detroit in October, another discussion centring on women's concerns occurred. Only this time, the women spoke first, and the males did not attempt to speak for the lesbian women. Although a male priest celebrated the HOD Mass, he wore a vestment adorned with the names of the major female figures in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Anniversary Mass incident in which a female Detroit member complained about sexism became, in terms of this research project, a case in point in how Dignity attempts to address the problems it encounters as part of its daily living.

The women sometimes struggle to explain their relationship with Dignity. In some cases, other lesbian women so reject the Catholic Church that they

will not even set foot on Church property lest someone construe that action as an endorsement of the Church's paternalistic, sexist power structure."⁶⁶ Such an attitude can serve to cut off female Dignity members from other women in the gay and lesbian community.

One of the respondents cited Dignity's history as a predominately male group discourages participation by women, especially when perhaps only one or two dozen women attend a meeting with eighty to one hundred males."⁶⁷

Summary.

The interviews of lay Dignity members have shown that Dignity, in the eyes of the respondents, clearly meets many of its members needs. The respondents have told how they have found acceptance, community, and much more. Many see, in Dignity, a surrogate of a rejecting parish or family. Others who merely sought a place to worship, found instead help in their attempts to accept themselves as healthy gay and lesbian Catholics. In addition, it is interesting to note how the Dignity members seem to have chosen, as officers and leaders, those who have expressed in these

⁶⁶ Ann Arbor Female, personal communication, 1987.

⁶⁷ Tape Female #1, transcript, 163.

interviews, a positive relationship with the Church. This may be one of the strongest indications of the respondents' desires to remain within the Church and a source of strength for the group.

CHAPTER V
INTERVIEW DATA
A PASTORAL VIEW OF DIGNITY.

In order to guard against presenting a biased image of Dignity based only on interviews with members, several priests and members of religious orders who minister to the Dignity community were asked to participate in the study. The original methodology would have utilized the chaplains' expertise as trained professional pastoral ministers to check the validity of the lay respondents' interviews. The questions were designed to uncover any pastoral observations and

experiences that enabled the respondent chaplains to argue that Dignity meets some significant needs of the gay and lesbian Catholic community.

As the research project progressed, however, it became apparent that the chaplains' roles involved more than commitments of time and energy to either celebrate a liturgy or to present seminars or lectures as needed. Most of the respondent chaplains reported that they risked loss or damage to their professional careers if their involvement with Dignity became public knowledge. Nevertheless, they often attend Dignity liturgies on a regular basis, spending two or three additional hours at the social. Quite frequently, they visit and counsel individual Dignity members, giving some of them instructions in preparation for the sacraments -- according to the Roman Rite -- as well as sharing meals with the group, as described in Chapter V.

Description of Chaplain Respondents.

The bishop and the six chaplains who participated in the study have each been actively employed in professional ministry through their dioceses or religious orders for at least ten years in any number of Church-related positions such as parish work, teaching, or administration. They come from dioceses in Ontario, Michigan, and Ohio.

As the study progressed it became evident that some of the priest respondents regularly join the congregation at Dignity's Sunday night Mass. They come, not only to minister, but also to address their own religious and social needs. The study interviews revealed their perception that, at Dignity, they could find refreshment and renewal. Some of the chaplains share the same sexual orientation as the majority of members and participants at Dignity -- and a similar array of ethical dilemmas. These gay chaplain respondents reported that Dignity provides them with support, acceptance, and a religious and social opportunity for interaction with like-minded gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

To protect these respondents' identities, little else can be revealed about their backgrounds, current

pastoral assignments, or areas of specialization. Those who formally devote their lives to religious ministry within the hierarchical structure of the Church form a relatively small, exclusive, and shrinking population. Certain data could possibly identify the respondents to their superiors or ordinaries, placing them under threat of disciplinary action. Therefore, despite the fact that two respondents did provide oral or written permission for the release of their names, their identities will be concealed as completely as possible.

A few of the chaplain respondents do hold paid memberships in one Dignity chapter or another. This is one way that they can underscore their support of the organization. Two chaplain respondents helped organize the Ann Arbor and the Toledo chapters, respectively. Two currently serve as chapters' chaplains. The priests who participated in the study celebrate Mass, hear confessions, and administer other sacraments within the context of the Dignity community as needed. All the ministers provide counselling, spiritual direction, religious and liturgical education. To facilitate outreach, all respondents maintain some degree of presence in the community at socials,

dinners, and other functions.

Length of Time Ministering.

The duration of the chaplain subjects' involvement varied with the individual and ranged from attendance at a few liturgies prior to the celebration of only one Mass, to many years of work with the Dignity community. One chaplain became involved at a chapter's first Mass, and continued as he/she assisted members in the process of chapter formation, and through fifteen years of peace and stability. This chaplain helped the chapter as it tried to define its position on sexual ethics in a reply to its ordinary, and, later, when it received notice to leave its home parish. This chaplain helped celebrate that chapter's Exodus liturgy at its last Mass on Catholic property, and continues to celebrate for them in their new home in a Protestant church. In one case, ministry included service as the chaplain appointed by the ordinary to the gay and lesbian community.

The subjects reported that their ministry with Dignity commenced in a variety of ways. However, those who minister to Dignity realize that they have been carefully selected by trusted Dignity members or officers. Often, a first invitation to celebrate Mass,

and later, to take a place in the rotation of celebrants, occurred as a result of a friendship with a chapter officer or a good working relationship with Dignity members and the chaplain. On occasion, those in the core celebrant group have introduced their priest friends to Dignity. One priest invited five of his friends to say Mass for Dignity. Another chaplain's fifteen-year-long involvement began with a student's invitation to attend a Dignity Mass.

Rationale for Involvement.

Although the reasons for subjects' involvement varied with the individuals, in general, the chaplain respondents reported experiences that roughly paralleled the lay members' categories of meaning. However, to reflect the unique experiences and insights of this particular subject population the categories of meaning have been altered to include: (1) ministry to the oppressed; (2) spirituality; (3) pastoral views of benefits to members; (4) negative aspects; and (5) the effect that Dignity had on the subjects' own lives and on their ministry.

Ministry to the Oppressed.

Some respondents stated that a concern for the gay and lesbian community as an oppressed minority drew them into this work. They said:

Any group that is...openly persecuted ...alienated...disenfranchised...from the Church and from society should find a home in the Church first. I look upon the homosexual person in the Church as the anawim -- God's little one's...the Old Testament word for the despised ones of the community...that nobody wanted...those were the very ones Jesus came to offer salvation to...I've looked upon the gay community as being those people that nobody wants, including the Church. So, here I was in a position of leadership being able to offer the gay community a home within the community.¹

I think it's an important group in the Church...it's a needy group...that identifies itself and is willing to identify itself as a minority. It needs support in what they are about. In their worship. In their understanding of God...they are kind of like the poor who say, "We're here and often enough we aren't accepted by other folks and we don't want to be rejected by God. And we know we aren't."²

Dignity's status as an oppressed group struggling to survive seems to have endeared it to its regional bishop. In an interview, Bishop Gumbleton, said³:

¹ Transcript, 248.

² Transcript, 235-236.

³ Written and oral permission was obtained for the use of Bishop Gumbleton's name in quoting from relevant interview material.

I feel about Dignity as I would feel about any group that's oppressed. What always pleases me is the fact that people who are oppressed become aware of that and develop enough consciousness about it that they're willing to struggle against their oppression and their oppressors. And this bestows or calls forth from within them a dignity that otherwise can be destroyed: a personal kind of dignity that each of us has as a human person. If we're oppressed, then our dignity is diminished, [and] can sometimes be totally destroyed so that we give up any sense of being self-determining, being free and independent, which we're supposed to be as adult persons within the Church or within society. Here is a mechanism for people to use to struggle against their oppression and overcome it and achieve a sense of worth, a sense of dignity. I find it very pleasing to see and experience this.⁴

Spirituality.

Some of the chaplains explained how they felt nurtured and enriched by presiding at a liturgy where they could sense the joy and enthusiasm of the Dignity congregation, which contrasts markedly with the liturgies celebrated by the heterosexual communities the chaplains usually work with. From the pulpit, one celebrant preceded his homily with an expression of gratitude for the privilege of ministering to Dignity, explaining publicly the depth of his spiritual experience during Dignity Masses, and stressing that priests, too, need to participate in a community such

⁴ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 274.

as Dignity where they, too, can be affirmed and nurtured.⁵

Two priests who sometimes worship anonymously as part of the congregation -- joes in the pew -- explain their participation:

It's more prayerful and spiritual than when I celebrate...it's more like work when you have to celebrate. You have to worry about the ministers and the lectors and all the other things that a pastor has to watch out for ...[At Dignity] there's a real community spirit as well as the attitude that people want to be there. In a parish...Catholics ...are there because it's the law. The spirit of Dignity is much better. There is a better presence...a willing attitude to be part of a community and to pray together.⁶

Spiritually, it has given me a sense of community...there are times when I come down to Mass simply because there is something very wonderful about the Dignity Mass and praying with the same people [as a community] for ten years....[and]...community is one of the main goals of Christianity...being part of a faith community is essential.⁷

Another chaplain subject reported a desire to act as the Church's voice, stating that the Church must speak to the gay and lesbian people who are not called to live a celibate way of life:

⁵ Field Notes, Dignity / Detroit, 19 November 1989.

⁶ Transcript, 259.

⁷ Transcript, 292.

I would be part of Dignity to be visible to the gay community as someone who is Church, who believes in Church, who loves the Church more than anything else in the world...so I can speak [to gays] and say they are loved.⁶

Some chaplains indicated that they based their involvement with Dignity on decisions they have made when determining priorities they will maintain when allocating their time, talent, and ministerial skills.

One said:

[Dignity] provides good worship....It's a very active liturgical community....people are present at the liturgies. They look, they listen...they want to be there. That's not at all the case in many places on Sunday ...there is a community sense there...people do sing, they respond...I don't know how that affects people's spirituality individually, but as a community...that is what liturgy is all about...It's not just people praying for themselves...they are there to [be a part of] what's happening, rather than drawing something off for themselves.*

One chaplain began working with Dignity as part of a search for a more meaningful ministry. Twelve years ago, the diocesan social justice director invited this chaplain to concelebrate at the opening Dignity Mass and to preach the homily. Five priests joined in the concelebration of that Mass, which was attended by seventy gay and lesbian men and women. The chapter was

⁶ Transcript, 315.

^{*} Transcript, 236-238.

organized that evening, and the priest's offer to act as chaplain was accepted. In looking back at these years of ministry the chaplain says:

What pleases me most about Dignity is seeing people who take their Christianity seriously, who make consistent and effective efforts to reach out to others and who are close to God. Occasionally one runs into flakes, of course, but the overall excellence is amazing.¹⁰

Pastoral Reaction to the Dignity Experience.

Some chaplains come away from a Dignity Mass so awed that they find it difficult to comprehend the hierarchy's opposition to Dignity. They explain:

Dignity has proved to be a profound spiritual, psychological, and social experience. Dignity members are the most deeply spiritual people I've known. There have been true miracles of grace as members minister to one another and help new people coming into the group.¹¹

[Dignity involves] all those things that help us to understand who we are, who God is and how we relate to each other and our fellow human beings....people are genuinely concerned to create a community of support ...[and] a strong service component which is a major component of one's spirituality. They've got enough people to make a big difference in Trinity Parish, and they do.¹²

How can we, as official church, say no to this celebration of the Body of Christ? How

¹⁰ Correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Transcript, 237.

can we say to the gay people that they are not a part of the Church when we see what's going on here...when you see the spirit of God so working, so very alive, so celebrating? The Body of Christ -- it's there!¹³

One chaplain who participated in the study sees Dignity helping its members find a place in the Church, as this respondent explained:

It has given a sense of self-respect and dignity to its members and allowed people to understand that, as homosexuals, they have a legitimate place within the Church....Dignity gives [this group of] the oppressed a chance to struggle against that oppression...and to achieve self-worth.¹⁴

Another chaplain explained that, to many, Dignity is part of the coming out process that they gradually outgrow as they finally come to terms with their sexual orientation. According to this chaplain, these people use Dignity to gain self-acceptance as gay and lesbian people. Subsequently, many decide they can survive in their own parish, and come to feel that they are no longer in need of Dignity's support. They acquire their own social circle of gay or lesbian friends. In a sense, they grow up, and, for better or worse, they abandon the Dignity Mass for full parish participation.

¹³ Transcript, 316-317.

¹⁴ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 271.

This chaplain states that such individuals no longer feel the need for "the womb of Dignity." On the other hand, this chaplain reports that other chaplains have confided tales of several successful suicides of young people who had no support in coming out. Consequently, this chaplain is glad to see that some individuals have made Dignity their main social group.¹⁵ The chaplain explains:

This is their one night of really having friends...the only social group [for] many people who are single...alone...struggling to find community...Dignity can empower people ...giving [them] the opportunity to be involved with other people instead of staying home in an apartment, crying themselves to sleep, or attempting suicide.¹⁶

This chaplain's views are confirmed by another respondent who praises the sense of community that would allow people to band together:

People are genuinely concerned to create a community of support [in Dignity]. Judging just from the community sense that's there, my feeling is that certainly individuals would feel very much at ease in calling for help or sharing just that need to talk. Or [as] a place to celebrate, not just religious things, but life itself.¹⁷

And it is within the context of this community

¹⁵ Transcript, 296.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Transcript, 237.

that one chaplain has seen members acquire a sense of self-acceptance:

People come into Dignity afraid. You know many people are working through [serious problems. At Dignity] there's laughter, there's joking. There's all kinds of things going on. But there's always some people in that group for whom there's a personal agenda that's not out there to be seen...they come to terms with their own gayness. Coming to a level of self-acceptance [is] perhaps item #1 on the psychological agenda for this person. More importantly perhaps than looking for intimacy...they're still seeking comfortableness with their own identity.¹⁶

To the gay priests in the survey, Dignity also provides a support community. One chaplain states:

[To me] the attitude of being a member of a community [helps]. Obviously, I'm not the only gay priest in this area, in the world, and we feel a great sense of camaraderie between us. If it were not for that, I'd really be struggling. I get the camaraderie not only from fellow gay priests, but from Dignity as well. I know I'm not in this alone...Because of Dignity and the camaraderie of gay priests, the struggle is a lot easier. I can't understand how anyone would survive without that. When I encounter them, I encourage them to join Dignity.¹⁷

In short, most of the respondents have come away from their contacts with Dignity impressed at the effect it has on its members. One in a leadership position said:

¹⁶ Transcript, 293-294.

¹⁷ Transcript, 268.

Their [Dignity members'] involvement could be a way of their beginning to feel better about themselves and their relationship with the Church, which is what I see happening....I've seen some of them [Dignity members] feel much more accepted and connected with the Church through Dignity as they participate in the activities of the parish where...a number of them go.²⁰

Negative Aspects of Dignity.

One respondent was included in the study because of his long-time support for Dignity. However, during the course of the interviews, this chaplain stated that he had become disillusioned and disappointed with Dignity. The chaplain offered this explanation for refusal to celebrate Mass for the local Dignity chapter that he helped start:

I think they've blown it. They continue to want their own exclusivity to the point of sacrificing inclusivity. They want to be included [in the Church], but only on their own terms....They want their own, closed celebration of the Eucharist...there are some in Dignity because of the religious element. That is not true of the mainstream. It was my hope that Dignity would offer an alternative to that [gay bar and health club] life style....[Dignity] can be that. When homosexuals get together, they don't have to be on the make. They can get together simply to enjoy themselves gathered around God's word to experience their humanity...not their genitality.²¹

²⁰ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 271.

²¹ Transcript, 255.

This chaplain expressed a feeling of disappointment that Dignity did not meet his/her expectations. The chaplain said:

Usually, these people [gays in parishes] seem a lot more healthy than Dignity members. They seem to be much more sexually assured, they seem to be much more mature. I was always struck by the immaturity of most of the members. Their willingness to be silly, to play games of he-said-she-said and to call each other a bitch....Membership in the early days [of Dignity] tended to be younger. Now, it's [an] older [group]...and part of the immaturity has to do with Dignity becoming a meat market kind of place where you make contacts for sexual liaisons.²²

Another chaplain who had only celebrated once at the time of the interviews, seemed to agree with the disillusioned chaplain's perception of Dignity as a factor that fragments the Church by pulling gay and lesbian people out of their parishes. As a pastor, this chaplain wants the gay and lesbian people within his canonical jurisdiction to participate in his parish regardless of the emotional toll they have to pay, which has been discussed earlier. This pastor explains:

[Dignity] segregates. It pulls away from the main body of the Church. I think it should be a support system...Dignity doesn't do that....It takes in and holds and keeps its people. It doesn't encourage [them] to go

²² Transcript. 250, 254.

back²²....[In my parish], I recognize the relationships of homosexuals. I encourage them to be a part of the community...[and] the general population...these same people belong to our parish, here. I know who they are, they know I know who they are. And they're committed. They are our couplesThat brings real joy to my heart...They go to Dignity on occasion...I encourage gays to be there, to be in attendance, and to be involved. They don't go broadcasting that they're in a homosexual relationship. They obviously cannot talk about it.²⁴

The segregation that this chaplain refers to may, in fact, be similar to the cultural differences that were celebrated in the great ethnic parishes that arose during the waves of immigration to the U.S. and Canada and still persist today. This raises the issue of whether Dignity is actually a gay and lesbian cultural expression of Roman Catholicism. Bishop Gumbleton seems to open that possibility in explaining how varieties of cultural expression in the Church must not exclude others:

A cultural expression of the faith within the Polish culture or a black culture that would be different from the cultural expression of the faith within an Italian culture....If you are from a different ethnic background...if you speak a different tongue...you might not find that liturgy attractive...but if you decided you wanted to go, and you wanted to

²² Transcript, 318.

²⁴ Transcript, 313.

learn the language, you should be welcome.²⁵

And, indeed, apparently the Dignity Mass, as an expression of the gay and lesbian culture, is unique enough to upset the unsuspecting straight person who perhaps may never have seen -- or thought of the possibility of -- such a large gathering of gay and lesbian people openly celebrating in the context of a faith community. From this point of view, Dignity's role in slowly breaking down negative stereotypes becomes evident. Gumbleton explains:

Sometimes, when people come to that particular Mass at Holy Trinity, and it becomes apparent to them that a sizable number of the congregation are homosexual, sometimes those people, if they tend to be homophobic, became upset, alarmed -- whatever word you want to use -- it depends on how strong their reaction. And sometimes I've received letters of complaint or concern, and I'm sure the Archbishop has also. When we have, we've explained to the person contacting us that this is a scheduled Sunday Mass, they're welcome to come -- so are gay people welcome to come, just as they should be welcome at any Mass. We don't exclude them or demean them in any way, the gay people that are at that Mass. So we support their coming. So we explain that. Generally, people are satisfied with the explanation once you put it to them in terms that the Mass is there for every person, for every Christian, every believer. And we don't say no to these people. We certainly don't want to. And we can't and be consistent with our own beliefs as

²⁵ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 275-276.

Christians....They [the straight people] accept [this explanation] and begin to understand...better than they did before.²⁶

Dignity's Impact on the Professional Minister.

One of the chaplains who helped found a chapter explained that involvement with Dignity had increased sensitivity by forcing him / her to focus on perceived personal failings as a minister:

It brought me into contact with the other side of the coin, the dark side, of people's prejudices...[and] with my own limitations and prejudices. I didn't realize how prejudiced I was. I learned I have a road to walk myself in becoming more tolerant of other people.²⁷

This prejudice, the chaplain confided, included a very real feeling of repulsion when confronted with some aspects of gay and lesbian lifestyle and behaviour, and his fears that he would be labelled by parishioners as gay if he became too involved socially with the group. The issue arose when the chaplain was invited to attend the dinner-dance which traditionally follows the Mass that highlights the regional HOD meetings that the local chapter was hosting. The pastor now regrets this decision not to participate in the function with the Dignity leaders. He states that

²⁶ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 277.

²⁷ Transcripts, 255-256.

he feels he erred in not attending that social function which is treasured by the Dignity leadership because of the bonding that occurs between the officers.²⁸

Another chaplain discovered that working with Dignity changed the chaplain significantly. The chaplain said:

[The Dignity experience] has personalized the talk about AIDS....It's an issue that some people I know, if only casually and through conversation, are involved in....I don't know if I would have gone to a workshop on AIDS at [Henry] Ford Hospital for clergy had it not been for my involvement in Dignity. I would have seen it as an important thing, but I'm not sure I would have made the time.²⁹

One of the gay chaplains gave the following reason for continued involvement with Dignity:

To see other gays and lesbians who are Catholics practising their faith [affects me]. To know that we are not individuals, rather, we are a community. The strength comes in numbers. On a personal level, it's a more spiritual experience at Dignity, either at the altar or in the pews, than in the parish.³⁰

In other instances, priests relate that when they celebrate Mass for Dignity, the experience is unlike their experiences in their parishes or other

²⁸ Transcript, 256.

²⁹ Transcript, 238-239.

³⁰ Transcript, 261.

ministries, and they comment on its special qualities:

When I celebrated, it was deeply spiritual. I experienced a real sense of God. Those are gifts you may get once in a while. On that day, it was given. Quite abundantly. I was overwhelmed by the experience and the sense of God.²¹

Without Dignity, my spiritual life would be immeasurably poorer. The intensity of the liturgies, retreats, and days of recollection have helped me as much as any other member of Dignity. I've received back far more than I've given.²²

Bishop Gumbleton offers some insights into these priests' experiences. The insights help explain why the chaplains continue in ministry to Dignity:

What these ministers have experienced is very similar to the experience I find any time you reach out and enter in the struggle of a group of people and become part of it. You're enriched by that experience....Every time you do that you receive as much or more than you give. It's just the way things are. The blessings that come to the giver are usually greater than what the giver has given away, especially when they are spiritual.²³

Thus, the experiences of the chaplain respondents provide added emphasis to the members' biographies and oral histories, while adding to the evidence that the spirit of Dignity does indeed survive in the minds and

²¹ Transcript, 318.

²² Correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

²³ Bishop T. Gumbleton, transcript, 273.

hearts of its members -- and its ministers -- because it meets some of the individuals' most profound needs. This spirit, and the determination of those who have felt Dignity's benefits, may very well insure the survival of Dignity as an organization.

CHAPTER VI

SURVEY DATA

Rationale.

In May of 1989, while the interview portion of this research project was in progress, the executive council of the Detroit chapter decided to survey its membership to determine if Dignity was effectively meeting the needs of its members. The council compiled a list of questions and subsequently mailed copies of the survey with stamped, pre-addressed return envelopes to all those on its mailing list living within the state of Michigan. The mailing list includes all dues-

paying members; non-members and participants who attend the meetings, liturgies, or other events; friends and supporters; chaplains and celebrants; those involved in ministry to the gay and lesbian community and people with AIDS; and other individuals who have expressed interest in Dignity/Detroit. In addition to those on the mailing list, copies of the survey were made available at a number of Dignity functions.

A discussion of the survey results is relevant to this research project primarily because it provides a broader range of members' reactions to the Dignity experience than the interviews alone. A number of open-ended questions allowed for spontaneous, handwritten answers that, in fact, supplement the interviews. Again, it must be noted that the results of either the survey or the interviews cannot be projected onto the entire population of the Detroit chapter because random sampling techniques were not used in either case.

Survey Questions.

The first four questions asked how members first learned about Dignity, how they made their initial contacts, and how long they have attended functions, and how long they have held memberships. These were

forced response questions. Respondents checked off only one of several options to answer these questions. Questions six and seven asked the sex and the age of the respondents.

Survey respondents expressed a perception of their organization's relationship to the Church in their answers to question eight, which dealt with the members' image of Dignity. Fifty-five percent of 103 respondents said they felt Dignity was "a Catholic organization comprised of gays and lesbians," while twenty-four percent felt it was a "gay and lesbian organization comprised of Catholics."¹ Other questions showed that sixty-seven percent of 101 responses felt that spiritual development was the area of their greatest concern, while sixty percent of ninety- .x responses ranked making political statements as the least important of Dignity's priorities. A related question showed that seventy-nine percent of 108 respondents attend the Sunday liturgy and after Mass social. The survey also requested suggestions for new acquisitions to the chapter's library, options for possible chapter activities, and for respondents to

¹ Dignity/Detroit Membership Questionnaire Summary, unpaginated, question #8.

indicate whether or not they would be willing to register as a member of Holy Trinity parish. (Respondents were evenly divided on this issue: forty-nine percent of 101 indicated they would; forty percent said no; and twelve failed to respond.)

The questions relevant to this study asked why individuals had not joined Dignity (question five); whether or not the members feel welcome (question fourteen); themes and topics for retreats, discussion sessions, and the weekly bulletin (questions fifteen, sixteen, and eighteen); and members' general comments.

Demographics.

Survey respondents resembled the interview sample in that they ranged in age from twenty-one years to over the age of sixty. Respondents also reflected the male dominance evident at Masses and other functions with ninety-seven male, eight females, and there was one "no response" reply. The survey failed to ask any other demographic questions regarding occupation, income levels or means of employment, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation.

Reasons for Refusal to Join Dignity.

This question spurred an immediate response from two individuals who commented that they could think of

no valid reason for not joining. They indicated they were including checks for dues with their completed questionnaire -- while another person stated that he/she could not afford to pay those same dues.

A number of replies may explain some of Dignity's difficulty in reaching a larger segment of the gay and lesbian population. Although the Detroit chapter is large, it represents but a small portion of gay and lesbian people in Detroit and the broad geographic area of heavily populated southeastern Michigan from which Dignity could draw its membership. A respondent who indicated that he/she was a member of the Jewish faith, but who stated that he/she belongs to MCC, would not join Dignity because his/her time and finances were already overextended. Another couldn't join because he/she refers clients to Dignity. One person stated that he/she would not join because Dignity is, "...too much of a clique."⁴² Two people indicated that they would not join because they disagreed with the Church's position on sexual ethics. They said:

I am not comfortable with the position of the Roman Catholic Church as being compatible with Dignity and a positive gay identity.

I'm not happy with the Catholic Church's

⁴² Ibid., question #5.

attitude toward the gay lifestyle and its active campaign to close Dignity chapters. The Church just isn't supportive. Dignity Detroit appears to be tolerated by specific pastors and/or auxiliary Bishops -- its like walking on egg[s] -- you're always wondering what an individual cleric's position is.²⁹

Members' Perceptions of a Welcoming Attitude.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (eighty-three) indicated feeling welcome at Dignity events while sixteen stated they did not feel welcome. Six respondents failed to reply to this question. In the comments written by the group that felt welcome, many stated that they had been warmly received, that they had been welcomed and introduced to members of the group, and that they felt loved by a "...warm and caring group of people."³⁰ They indicated that they regarded Dignity as their parish, and that they felt "...a sense of safety and acceptance."³¹ Others included comments that they have found that "...an apparent non-judgemental atmosphere exists and people are generally friendly" or that "...members came up to me during [the] social hour; welcomed me and we talked --- lots of smiles. When entering the church ---

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., question #14

³¹ Ibid.

greeters are warm & friendly -- you feel you belong."⁴

However, another thread was woven even through the approving comments. Many respondents indicated that they had not felt welcome when they first started attending, or that they felt welcome only because they are friendly with the chapter leadership, or that they feel welcome despite the presence of cliques. Some of their comments reveal the existence of an in-group and an out-group hierarchy. Six people stated, "...I already know people, but I wonder if new visitors are made to feel welcome enough." Others said:

I am very friendly with the core who holds Dignity together and always feel welcome.

I only speak to the men I already know.

I've been there long enough. I feel new people Sunday after Sunday are left alone and not made welcome.

The feeling I received from the participants during the 1st two years was that I was either an 'observer' or was simply 'cruising.' I have only recently felt that I was accepted as a member of the group. Attempts at trying to meet new people were not well-received; again, I got the feeling that they thought I was trying to pick them up.

I feel that newcomers are not made welcome at the social gathering unless they are young and handsome. I really do not feel this is right. More effort should be made to welcome

⁴ Ibid.

those most in need of comfort.”

Two quotes might help to explain why this perception by some members of not being welcome is so prevalent, and how one member dealt with this issue.

The members said:

I feel welcomed now but it is hard to 'break in;' most have their group of friends and so the newcomer can feel alone.

When I first came...I didn't feel accepted because I wasn't a familiar face -- I knew no one and no one knew me. I forced myself to ...help [other members]...& [sic] return week after week until now I am comfortable & I really feel I belong.⁷

The sixteen individuals who stated that they felt unwelcome cited, on the whole, four issues: poor liturgies, cliquishness, a sexist attitude, and sexual acting out. In the face of interview comments by celebrants and members alike about the exuberant joy visible in the liturgies, as well as the researchers' observations, the comments about the liturgies raise questions about the depth of feeling expressed in earlier liturgies. Survey respondents decried the cold, stiff formality they perceived in the liturgies that some describe as "...more conservative than in my

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

home parish...." and "...uninspired and without the joy earlier liturgies had."⁹

The strongest comments on sexual acting out involved statements that appearances and youth were used as a criteria for acceptance by some members. A member stated:

Sometimes I feel uncomfortable with some of the men's behaviour, such as the drag queen type of behaviour.¹⁰

Observations about cliques ranged from statements from a woman who said "...I am often made to feel that I am intruding" to comments that "...council members are too elitist." Others, while citing some members' aloofness, stated that they felt that "...people are not genuinely friendly..." or some members were "...hypocritical/two faces."¹¹

Although the following member indicated he/she felt unwelcome, he/she also stated:

So much depends on the effort the individual is willing to make...the membership needs to be reminded of the importance of holding open arms and hearts to all.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

General Comments.

Those who took the time to make additional comments discussed their vision of what Dignity should and could become. In these comments, the members' anger and dissatisfaction with the chapter's tentative relationship with the hierarchy was expressed. Two members of the comments were:

Describe Dignity as a Catholic organization
???? --- is Dignity even listed in the
diocesan directory? -- Absolutely not - Why?;
Does Dignity receive anything from the CSA
[diocesan fund raising]? Does the Cardinal
celebrate Mass with Dignity?

It's tough enough being gay in society ---
honestly, sometimes I get the impression that
Dignity is not "Dignity" since it is so
subservient to individual clerics' whims for
its very existence.¹³

One signed, typewritten letter written by a male
member explains earlier comments on the liturgies:

For many years, DD frequently celebrated
liturgies that were alive and drew the
membership together. Gathering around the
altar is symbolic of this. Yes, there was
less bowing, genuflecting and turning of the
eyes upward to the heavens. And maybe even a
few pinches of the anatomy took place during
the 'kiss of peace.' But this informality
and sense of community made people happy
....On a couple of occasions I sat in the
back pew....I almost cried over the lack of

¹³ Ibid., "General Comments."

enthusiasm....¹⁴

Discussion.

The survey, because it was anonymous, gave the members an opportunity to freely express their opinions about Dignity. On the whole, the survey results paralleled the interview results. There were two exceptions. Although a number of negative comments about cliquishness did appear in the course of the interviewing, they were not as pervasive as they were throughout the survey. Also, although those who were interviewed recalled earlier liturgies with fondness, the celebrants' and chaplains' excitement with what they witnessed and participated in would seem to balance. However a comment made by a visiting bishop endorses the survey's view that the liturgies have evolved into something less spontaneous and enthusiastic than they had been only two years earlier. The bishop said:

It's always good to celebrate with you. But you seem to have become more Catholic since my last visit. Before, many of you filled the front of the church. Now, most of you

¹⁴ Dignity/Detroit Membership Questionnaire Summary, correspondence with Dignity/Detroit executive council, 13 June 1989, unpaginated.

are sitting in the back.¹⁵

Since the survey was taken, the council has taken a number of steps to answer members' concerns. Cliquishness was addressed by stressing the greeting and welcoming of new members. Each week, a reservation is made in Dignity's name at a popular restaurant, as explained in Chapter V. A Women's Concerns committee has been formed, and women consistently now play a more visible role during the liturgies. Some of the topics and themes suggested by members have been utilized for lectures and a January retreat.

¹⁵ Homily preached at Dignity/Detroit; 7 January 1990.

CHAPTER VII

THE DIGNITY EXPERIENCE

The Gift.

The ways in which Dignity nurtures its members should be apparent in an examination of its everyday interactions and mundane rituals. Dignity members engage in these rituals as they play out any one of several variations on the theme of Mass, social, and dinner out -- extended Eucharist -- that make up the Dignity Sunday evening agenda. This portion of this research project attempts to describe briefly the rituals that make up the Dignity experience, as lived by Dignity members and recorded in the participant

observation portion of this research project.

One of those easily overlooked events that speaks so much about the way Dignity affects its members occurred shortly before the completion of the research project. The Dignity/Detroit chapter president spoke to the assembled membership as the Mass was ending on a Sunday eight days before Christmas in 1989. The chapter president announced that Dignity's elected officers would distribute long-stemmed red roses to all present. His address, however, showed a recognition of the effect that Dignity members have on one another. The Dignity/Detroit chapter president said:

Christmas is a special time of caring, loving and giving. By that definition, the Spirit of Christmas is alive and well fifty-two weeks a year here at Dignity. Walking through those doors [of Holy Trinity and its community centre] you give the most precious gift possible, the gift of yourself to those around you. For some of you, the time and energy you spend allow your gift to be [magnified] two or even threefold. Whatever your gift, it is appreciated by those around you, and especially, by those of us in leadership positions here at Dignity.¹

A few weeks later, in January, a bishop who had previously celebrated Mass for Dignity returned to

¹ Commentary by Dignity/Detroit president as recorded in field notes and addendum dated 17 December 1989.

celebrate one last time before he left the archdiocese of Detroit for a new assignment. He told Dignity to remember that they are loved by God -- that the greatest gift anyone can possibly give to Christ as God is this gift of self. The bishop underscored his acceptance of all in the Dignity community during the portion of the Mass in which participants extend a sign of peace to one another. He walked the entire length of the centre aisle, spending long moments exchanging greetings and pleasantries with as many Dignity members as he could reach. Many in the congregation reacted to his handshakes with startled surprise, and their looks of fear faded into smiles when he extended his hand to them. Many of those present did not expect this gesture of acceptance by a member of the hierarchy, especially at a point in Dignity history when memories of other chapters' expulsions were fresh. Some who were present may have feared that the bishop was there, not to say good-bye, but to tell them that their chapter, too, would now be expelled from its home parish. The gesture was especially significant because, on this particular Sunday, the archdiocese notified several parishes that their parishes would be closed.

I. The Weekly Liturgies.

The weekly liturgy remains at the heart of most of the members' Dignity experience. When examined closely, this Sunday liturgy consists of a number of rituals surrounding the celebration of the Mass. Dignity's liturgy consists of four elements. First, there are the pre-Mass activities that take place beginning in the community centre and in the church building itself. Secondly, members participate in the celebration of the Mass. Third, members and friends celebrate one another's presence during the social in the community centre. The Detroit chapter's vice president and spiritual director describes the fourth element -- the dinners in local restaurants that usually follow the social -- as an extended Eucharist.

Mass is scheduled to begin at 6 p.m. on Sunday. Some time after 4 p.m., parked cars line up like rosary beads, bringing life to otherwise deserted side streets in front of a small one storey grey brick bungalow. The building, Most Holy Trinity Parish's community centre, squats between a playground and an abandoned house a few blocks away from Detroit's Tiger Stadium. The handful of nuns who teach at Trinity's parish elementary school still use a portion of the community centre as a

convent. Trinity's property -- its physical plant -- is flanked on the one side by a major expressway. In front, it is dwarfed by a nearby state office building. On the other side, urban homesteaders have restored a few Carpenter Gothic turn-of-the-century homes. These structures stand out amid the crumbling relics of a neighbourhood decimated by urban renewal that mixed light industry and housing.²²

Dignity/Detroit's offices are located in the community centre. The office contains several shelves of books, the chapter's reading and reference library, and a Xerox machine. The mandatory desk, file and storage cabinets -- along with typical office paraphernalia -- contain liturgical linens and supplies. A television, VCR, sofa and overstuffed chair, end table, and lamp complete the furnishings. Inside, members and officers quietly tend to the routine administrative and organizational tasks that the leadership of any group must address: correspondence, financial affairs, and newsletters. The office is sometimes used as a meeting room. Here, council members mediate disputes arising out of the personality or

²² William M. Worden, Trinity Yesterday and Today (Detroit: Most Holy Trinity Church, 14 July 1987), 13.

policy conflicts that any close-knit community faces.

In another part of the centre, laughter rings out from a home like kitchen and living room, where a few men make small talk as they began brewing coffee and setting out bowls and trays of snacks on a long conference/dining room table in the living/dining room area. Yet another group occupies the three sofas and one overstuffed chair in this area, renewing acquaintances and catching up on the past week's news, until about fifteen minutes before Mass. The community centre is frequently left open during Mass, giving late-comers and those who choose not to attend Mass a place to gather.

Every now and then Dignity faces one or another of a group considered by many to be unacceptable: the street people and the poor. The unkempt, the angry and the unsettling who occasionally wander in seeking warmth, a resting place, or something to eat or drink find their needs filled by Dignity officers or chaplains.

By six p.m., approximately one hundred men and between six and twelve women converge on Trinity's 150-year-old brick edifice. The assembling worshippers range in age from approximately twenty-one to over sixty

years of age. Attire varies from seasonally casual sport clothes to three piece business suits. As individuals approach, either singly or in couples, men and women wave and call out to one another, in a warm exchange of greetings. In the warm weather, clusters of men linger in conversation on the church steps or on the park benches lined up in the plaza that faces the church and its adjacent rectory.

In the tiny vestibule, an oblong corkboard holds several rows of the alphabetized white-on-green plastic clip-on tags of given names -- one for each chapter member. As members enter, part of their greeting ritual involves claiming and donning these name tags. Other long-time male members stand by with marking pens and long strips of white stick-on labels in hand, offering handwritten name tags to newcomers, non-members, parishioners, or visitors. The majority of those in attendance, including Dignity members, their friends and relatives, accept the tags. The tags do facilitate a sense of community and acceptance. However, they also set newcomers apart, and, apparently, have on occasion marked some of them as targets for the sexual advances of more aggressive individuals.

The small number of parishioners from Holy Trinity

who attend this Mass usually wave off the tags as do the people who have come from some of the adjacent parishes closed by the archdiocese in 1989 in an efficiency move. Consequently, the name tags separate the Dignity members into a highly visible community for the duration of the liturgy. This act of self-identification is one way in which members can begin the coming out process. When they first start attending, they wear the impermanent white paper tags. The treasurer orders the plastic tags when individuals apply for membership, thus formally identifying themselves as part of Dignity. For some, this may be one of the few opportunities in course of their daily lives when they can overtly identify themselves as active members of a gay and lesbian community without fear of retribution.

In the back of the church, a vested priest watches as careful preparations for entrance and offertory processions, the collection, and distribution of the Eucharist fall into place. Members are assigned to the roles of lectors, Eucharistic ministers, and ushers. A tall, narrow cream coloured banner with forest green lettering that features the lower case Dignity logo stands in the sanctuary behind and to the left of the altar proclaims the presence of the assembled Dignity

community.

The Mass proceeds in compliance with the Roman Ritual and with archdiocesan guidelines. An element of orthodoxy and conservatism has become entrenched in the liturgy. In discussions at meetings of the Pastoral Ministry committee, officers have stated that compliance with liturgical guidelines may help prevent unnecessary disagreements with their ordinary. Also, the tendency to celebrate the liturgy in a conservative manner may stem from the fact that Dignity's celebrants are drawn from a far ranging geographical area and a broad variety of ministries. The liturgies still partially reflect the philosophy of the former vice president and spiritual director, who stated that he felt that the liturgies should reassure Dignity members who are trying to overcome an alienation from the Church. He said:

I am very jealous of trying to protect those people with a fragile faith returning to the Church after a long absence, before Vatican II...they say they want to be in the Church and they are giving the Church one more try...I don't have radical, modern liturgy... because these people who are reentering the Church would find it totally foreign.³

Until mid-summer of 1989, this conservative tenor, marked by strict adherence to norms and by the use of

³ Tape Male #8, transcript, 94.

gender exclusive, sexist language in the canon and in all scriptural readings, coloured the liturgy. However, changes have occurred. The use of feminine images of God and inclusive language have now been coupled with an increased presence of women on the altar as lectors, homilists, Eucharistic ministers, and in other roles. The changes resulted, in part, from the election of a new vice-president and spiritual director. Pressure from members -- male and female -- articulated through personal communications to the officers coupled with the comments on the surveys, served as indications of the need to address the problem of sexism in the liturgies.

In outward appearances and behaviour, the Dignity congregation varies little from a heterosexual congregation. One major difference mentioned earlier is the presence of large numbers of males who are eager and happy to participate in a Sunday liturgy -- singly or as couples. And just as heterosexual couples might sit close to one another at their parish Masses, so in this setting, do many of the Dignity members. A few exchange overt signs of warmth and affection: arms slung around a partner, some hand-holding. However, the most striking thing about the liturgy is the joy, the intensity, and

the level of participation in the recitation of prayers. One is struck by the vigorous singing of so many enthusiastic male voices -- even when they don't know the words, loudly hum or chant along. The silent worshipper is the exception rather than the rule at a Dignity Mass.

At communion, the majority in attendance receive the Eucharist -- available under both species (bread and wine) -- distributed to them by their friends who address each recipient by his or her given name.

Few non-Dignity members participate in this Mass. Officially, it is listed as a parish Mass, open to all. During the summer, a number of people who wore hospital identification tags attended regularly. Older heterosexual men and women arrived in small groups of two or three from neighbouring parishes that have been closed by the archdiocese. Young mothers or grey-haired women have accompanied their children or grandchildren. One woman brought her young children to Mass for several months on a regular basis, and always sat close to the front.

One confusing behaviour pattern exhibited during the Eucharistic prayer may be indicative of members' ambivalent attitudes toward the Church. Worshippers'

participation in ritual actions -- standing, sitting, and kneeling with the rest of the congregation at the appropriate times -- is used by anthropologists as an index of participants' assent and belief in the dogmas symbolized and portrayed in the ritual. In other words, a non-believer attending a religious service can indicate his/her separation from the faithful, and non-adherence to their creed simply by remaining seated or refusing to follow other gestures routinely used by the congregation throughout the course of the service. In local parishes, the entire congregation either stands or kneels throughout the Eucharistic prayer. However, at Dignity, more than ninety per cent of the men kneel, while the rest stand. The issue has, at times, generated enough discussion so that those who choose to stand during this time have been asked to move to the sides of the pews away from the centre aisle.

The chapter president states that there has been opposition to standing during the Eucharistic prayer because many members feel that standing too closely resembles the protests taken by Dignity/New York activists who routinely stand through portions of Masses

that are held in St. Patrick's Cathedral.⁴ The group, called the Cathedral Project, is attempting to call attention to the ordinary's stand on gay and lesbian civil rights, and his eviction of the Dignity/New York chapter from its home parish. However, one of the chaplains stated that this behaviour may simply be indicative of the fact that the community as a whole is divided on how to address liturgical developments within the Church -- as many heterosexual communities are divided.⁵

Mass concludes with announcements of all weekly Dignity events. There are educational workshops dealing with such topics as grieving for the loss of a loved one. Religious education lectures focus on liturgy or church history. A recently organized committee, formed to address women's concerns, hosts periodic pot luck suppers. Once a month, Dignity members clean the church, decorating it frequently, as the liturgical seasons dictate. Occasionally, an evening is devoted to watching old movies on the VCR. And members are urged to attend any number of events sponsored by Holy

⁴ Patricia Lefevere, "Gay Catholic Struggle Moves into N.Y. Courts," National Catholic Reporter, 15 April 1988.

⁵ Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, transcript, 272.

Trinity. A brief newsletter that closely resembles the bulletins many traditional parishes use is distributed to all as they leave the church. In addition, the council mails a monthly newsletter to members, participants, chaplains, and friends of the chapter.

The Social.

After Mass, more than seventy-five per cent of those present walk the short distance past one recently restored Carpenter Gothic home and one abandoned home on Porter street to enjoy two or three hours of what is officially known as "The Social." Here, the chatter and interpersonal interactions that occur closely resemble those at a gathering in someone's private home. Nonalcoholic beverages including cocoa, coffee, tea, and soda are available, as are some simple snack foods. Once a month, a member brings an elaborately decorated cake displaying a cartoon figure and the first names of all members who celebrated birthdays in the past thirty days.

On the surface, this gathering seems very superficial. Members could use it as an opportunity to rest while talking over news of the gay and lesbian community. This is a chance to share with friends feelings about significant events of the previous week

before the long drive home. However, a closer examination shows that the social hours actually vie with the Mass as a drawing card for many Dignity members. Many of the respondents in this research project stated that they have found the nurturance and affirmation they feel Dignity provides in the context of the social. Here, at the social, people have time to maintain and renew treasured friendships. Members have a chance to share freely the rich humour of the gay and lesbian community with no fear of censure by offended straight friends or co-workers.

In addition, the socials give members and friends an opportunity not only to meet new friends, but to also to learn -- and to try out -- the protocol, the social rules of the gay subculture. It is true that many Dignity members actively participate in some aspect of gay and lesbian night life. However, first-person accounts in national and local newsletters state that members value the after-Mass social because it presents an opportunity to meet others in the context of the gay and lesbian community.

The Extended Eucharist.

Sharing of food can be one of the most intimate and meaningful -- and basic -- acts of human communication and love. The rich symbolism of the meal is mirrored in the Christian ritual of the Mass, which, at its core, repeats the scenario that occurred the last time Christ broke bread with the men and women he had come to love deeply. Less frequently recalled, but no less important, is Luke's tale of Christ revealing himself to two grieving disciples who don't seem to realize that Christ has risen. Christ encounters them on the road to Emmaus. Hearing their pain, feeling their loss, Christ hides his identity throughout the course of a day's travel. That evening, over dinner, Christ reveals himself to his friends. Luke says that "...he was known to them in the breaking of the bread."⁶

When this project began, the researcher noted that small groups of members left the social to end the evening with a dinner together. This is the practice in many Dignity chapters. After all, the Mass, social, organizational meetings, and other activities that are part of the Dignity experience take up the greater part of the evening. However, the membership survey

⁶ Luke 24:13-35 RSV.

discussed earlier contained many comments about cliquishness, and so, in the summer of 1989, officers began routinely to make reservations for a large group at either an ethnic or gay restaurant. The arrangements present an opportunity for all -- the less popular members, members without cars, and even the most hesitant first-time visitor -- to be included in the dinner plans.

The concept that these Dignity dinners actually constitute an extended Eucharist was discussed in November at a workshop on the liturgy held at Dignity/Detroit. The chaplain and the chapter's vice-president discussed how the dinner contain the same elements that the Eucharist itself does. They concluded that mutual sharing, ritualistic behaviour, and communication take place in the group, made up of those who like and dislike one another, who dine together. Nevertheless, differences are set aside as all sit down and break bread together and while attempting to find peace.⁷

Favourite spots include a small Polish restaurant, any one of the thriving Mexican restaurants located near Holy Trinity; pizza parlours in Greektown;

⁷ Liturgical Workshop, field notes, November 1989.

or Backstage, a restaurant with a large gay and lesbian clientele. Dignity subgroups that are as small as six and as large as twenty-five members spend the next two or three hours together.

Occasionally the chaplains go with this group. Members returning to the Church after many years absence can learn, in this context, how to deal with the Church, and who to talk to about gay and lesbian issues. A good example occurred in early November. A thirty-year-old male told the researcher in dinner conversation about his attempts to find a Dignity chapter. He spoke about his life history, about his struggles to retain his Catholic identity, his concerns about the lack of women at Mass. His conversation turned to spiritual concerns. At this point, the evening's celebrant, who was sitting in the middle of a row of Dignity men across the table from the newcomer and the author, eased into the conversation. Soon, he had the young man's complete attention. The conversation between chaplain and newcomer continued, with the chaplain offering to answer any further questions the newcomer had at another, pre-arranged time. Later, the young man confided that this was the first chance he had ever had to talk informally

with a priest knowledgeable in gay and lesbian issues.⁶⁷

Few women participate in the extended eucharists. This may be due to the fact that some are in committed relationships, or because they feel that they don't want to spend additional time in a male environment. Some women have said they don't attend because of the expense involved. The interviews revealed that the women may hold lower status, and consequently, lower-paying jobs than the males. Also, the women have less free time than the men, because some have to work at more than one job, or their jobs require a considerable amount of work at home.

These factors strengthen barriers and reinforce gender stereotypes and lessen the possibility for increased communication. Until the women interact more freely with the men, their needs will never be completely addressed. The women's conversations show that few males are aware of their needs -- while some of the males are baffled because they don't understand how the women feel and why more do not belong to Dignity.⁶⁸ The women also complained of unfair treatment at the

⁶⁷ Field Notes, 12 November 1989.

⁶⁸ Region V HOD meetings at Ann Arbor and Detroit, Field Notes, July and October 1989.

hands of some members of the executive council. In view of these facts, it seems that the women could increase communication and awareness of their problems if they took part in the dinners. During this period, with a buffer zone of small talk about non-threatening issues, inter-group Dignity friendships are deepened, bonding occurs, and in-groups and out-groups are formed.

II. Other Events in Review.

The Meetings.

Periodically, the constitution of the Detroit chapter mandates regularly scheduled general membership meetings. These are held in addition to the meetings of the executive council which are open to any interested parties. It is in these formal settings, attended by approximately forty people, that issues of concern to the community surface. During the course of this research project, members have raised a number of issues. There were discussions about increased financial support for the chapter, and ways to raise money to help Holy Trinity. Another discussion dealt with members' concerns about recognizing symptoms of dissent and discord within the group. A member stated the group must address indications of dissatisfaction such as letters of protest and the divisions between

those who kneel and stand during the Eucharistic prayer
Regional House of Delegates (HOD) Meetings.

Dignity's constitution and by-laws mandate regularly scheduled gatherings of the representatives as part of the geographic divisions of the chapters. The Detroit, Ann Arbor and Toledo chapters are part of Region V, a four-state area that encompasses Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. Each chapter takes a turn at hosting the other chapters for these weekend meetings. The host chapter provides housing for many out-of-town delegates, some meals, and a Mass and dinner dance on Saturday night. Generally, two or three officers represent each chapter. While routine organizational business takes most of the meeting time, the HODs are valued by the officers for two reasons. First, this is an opportunity for the members to discuss -- and find possible solutions for -- problems plaguing a chapter. Secondly, the meals, housing patterns, meetings and liturgies and the dinner dance that make up a regional HOD serve as bonding rituals for those in leadership positions who shoulder the difficult burden of shepherding their portions of the Dignity flock.

In 1967, the regional HODs served as forums for officers attempting to cope with the trauma of

expulsions. At the 1989 Ann Arbor HOD, chapter presidents prepared for the national convention with presentations of each chapter's history. The leaders saw how chapters have survived expulsion, and in some cases, have grown. In the gay and lesbian community, an event such as this is especially significant because a considerable amount of gay and lesbian history is either trivialized or, more frequently, left unrecorded and thus, lost forever.

The Mass celebrated at the Ann Arbor HOD was presented in a spirit of ecumenism and of prophecy. Held at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Ann Arbor, the Mass was concelebrated by a male Catholic priest and a female Episcopalian priest. During the joint homily, the priests took turns speaking and sitting on the sacristy steps, in front of the communion rail. The liturgy evoked a range of reactions from joy and exuberance to anger and consternation. Overall, members expressed concern and fear of reprisals that might occur against the Catholic priest. Ann Arbor's actions may have been prophetic because, a few months later, the Mass that highlighted the San Francisco HOD was also concelebrated by male and female priests.

Funeral and Reconciliation.

In mid-summer, Dignity Detroit's president announced the death of another one of its members. At the social, the day, date and time of the wake and the funeral were announced. The night before the funeral, more than fifty Dignity members and other gay and lesbian people visited the suburban funeral home to say the rosary, a traditional Catholic custom. The next morning, again, Dignity members and others from the gay and lesbian community arrived in couples and alone. Like the other mourners, they prayed at the closed casket and admired the many flower arrangements sent by gay couples. And they joined a procession of cars through tree-corridorred suburban neighbourhoods to a Grosse Pointe church.

Two Dignity chaplains concelebrated the Mass with the parish pastor. The Dignity organist and a Dignity pianist provided the music. A Dignity member and Dignity's vice president and spiritual director served as lectors, reading the pre-Gospel scriptures. Close to one hundred Dignity members and other gay and lesbian friends made up nearly one-half of the congregation. In the sermon, the celebrant referred to the deceased by his full Christian name, which upset some of the Dignity

community. "That's not the name he used. That's not the name we used when we talked to him," one member said later.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the sermon was marked by the repeated use of the word "dignity." The homilist spoke of the dead man's inherent dignity. And he spoke of the dignity of his friends, whose simple presence in honour of the parishioner's memory added a measure of dignity to the occasion.

As the body was cremated, the mourners did not participate in a graveside prayer service. When the Mass was completed, the late Dignity member's family clustered together. The meal that is traditionally offered to mourning friends and relative was not held. On the surface, little apparent interaction occurred between the gay and straight communities at the funeral. Instead, many of the Dignity members drifted off to hold one of their own extended eucharistic meals at a small eatery.

One of the officers later said that this was the first time that the Dignity community had gathered in this way for the funeral of one of its members. In attending the funeral, many of the members may have come

¹⁰ Dignity/Detroit member, personal communication, August 1989.

just a little further out of their closets because, in their association with gay and lesbian friends at the funeral, they identified themselves with Dignity and with other gay and lesbian people.

The impact of this Dignity member's death continued to be felt for many months. In mid-September, Dignity hosted a memorial service for the Dignity member at Holy Trinity, inviting the larger gay and lesbian community to attend. Later, one of the officers reported how, as the man's family began to sort out his personal effects, they found newsletters and other material from Dignity. And they found evidence of their kin's generosity to the gay community and his involvement with groups dedicated to helping people with AIDS. The officer found himself in the position of having to explain what Dignity was, and to detail the man's charitable work, which few in the straight community might have known about.

The family member was able to confirm that, apparently, Dignity had provided her kin with support at critical periods of his life. The family promised to hold a reception for the gay community. Cynics at Dignity, who had heard such promises many other times, stated that they felt that no heterosexual family would ever keep such a promise.

The cynics were wrong. Early in December, Dignity published an announcement in its newsletter that all would be invited to a reception hosted by the late Dignity member's family at his Grosse Pointe home. The house was fully decorated for Christmas. An exclusive restaurant catered the meal. As the large, mostly male crowd gathered, some members who were present stated that it was their perception that the family's intent was to extend hospitality -- its own version of an extended eucharist -- and reconcile itself with the gay and lesbian community. There were long conversations between the family and these friends of their loved one whom they had never met. In turn, the gay and lesbian friends shared some of their memories over a lavish meal of stuffed chicken breasts, pasta, and later, cakes and pastries.

Blessing of Couples and Relationships.

In the Roman Rite, the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's Day is designated as the Feast of the Holy Family. At Dignity/Detroit, this date is set aside for a formal blessing of couples and relationships. In the course of the interviews, several of the respondents had referred to the ceremony as both meaningful and impressive -- a ceremony that they felt imparted a

dignity and holiness to commitments that they were either trying to establish or to maintain. The actual ritual varies from year to year.

This year, the blessing took place on 31 December 1989 -- New Years' Eve -- and was written by a Dignity member. The readings, from Sirach and the Pauline correspondence, commemorate the traditional heterosexual marriage relationship. However, at the pre-Mass greeting, the lay commentator read an explanation of the readings that called the congregation to examine the scriptural texts in the light of the Dignity community:

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. In celebrating this feast we are not celebrating the structure or the sociological realities of the Holy Family, but rather we are called to imitate the spiritual characteristics of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. We are called to reflect on how we are defining family as it pertains to the gay and lesbian community.¹¹

In the middle of the Mass, after the Gospel, homily and recitation of the Nicene creed, the chapter's vice president spiritual director read a blessing for the Dignity family. The community was asked to respond, "Lord, keep your family in peace," after each intercession. The blessing of the Dignity family was as follows:

¹¹ Field Notes, 31 December 1989.

Through your own obedience to Mary and Joseph you consecrated family life; make this family holy by your presence....Your heart was set on the concerns of God, make wherever we gather as family a place where God is worshipped with reverence....You made your own family the model of prayer, of love, and of obedience to God's will; by your grace make this family holy and let us share with each other the gifts you have given us....You loved those who were close to you and they returned your love; bind all families and this family together in the bonds of peace and of love for each other....At Cana in Galilee, when a new family was beginning, you gladdened it with your first miracle, changing water into wine; alleviate the sorrows and worries of this family and change them into joy...

We bless your name, O Lord, for sending Jesus to be part of a family, so that, as he lived its life, he would experience its worries and its joys. We ask you, Lord, to protect and watch over this family, so that in the strength of your grace its members may enjoy prosperity, possess the priceless gift of your peace, and, as the church alive in the homes, bear witness in this world to your glory.^{1e}

At this point, the ritual addressed the gay and lesbian couples, who were asked to stand -- even if their significant other was not present. Those not in relationships or unions were asked to remain seated. Approximately one-half of the eighty people in attendance stood up. The blessing of the gay and lesbian community followed:

God all holy, bestow on these your servants the fullness of your love as they commit their

^{1e} Field Notes, 31 December 1989

lives to each other....Help these standing before you to bond together in love. May we support this bond through our friendship ...Give strength to your servants to live, love and grow together, especially when pain and struggle may enter into their lives.... Give courage to them and to us to live, openly and honestly, our lives, to share our experiences with the world and with the ChurchAllow this community and the gay and lesbian community to affirm, claim as holy, good and blessed the relationships and unions as witnessed here today.

Lord God and Creator...you have called us to be your own. You do not want us to be alone in our lives, you have given to those who stand before you unions and relationships based on love, faithfulness, trust and forgiveness.

We ask you to bless these unions and relationships so that they may reflect the union of Christ with us, his Church: Look with kindness on them today. Amid the joys and struggles of their life you have preserved the union between them; renew their commitments to each other, increase your love in them, and strengthen their bond of peace so that, surrounded by family and friends, they may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing.¹³

¹³ Field notes, 31 December 1989.

Summary.

This chapter has shown that an overview of the Detroit chapters will not only dispel some stereotypes of the gay and lesbian community, but also show how Dignity meets the needs of its members. In the Detroit chapter, at least in the time of this research project, Dignity provided support for its members. This did not occur through therapeutic or self-help group discussions that some organizations use to address approaches to specific problems affecting individuals' lives. Instead, Dignity's members laughed, and loved, and prayed, and cried with one another -- and continue to do so. They teach one another, using the example of their own lives, that it's O.K. to express their spiritual and religious feelings. Members show that there are alternatives to the bar scene. Their conversations with one another tell newcomers that others struggle with the same problems that the newcomers do. When members hurt one another, others surround both sides of the dispute, smoothing things over, loving and forgiving both parties, keeping them within the community whenever possible. When relationships end, when a friend dies, there are hugs and shoulders to cry on. Others who understand the significance of the slow procession of

anniversaries in the development of a committed, exclusive, long-term relationship share the joy of these events as only other gay and lesbian people can. As shown, the Dignity community formally blesses the unions of all its members. Sometimes pettiness and gossip fray fragile relationships. The group has its own political struggles that, on occasion, seem to threaten the chapter's solidarity. Nevertheless, Dignity remains as a community that many have come to call parish, home, or family.

Section III.

CHAPTER VIII

DIGNITY'S EVOLVING SEXUAL ETHIC

As discussed earlier, Dignity's dissenting position that gay and lesbian people can express their sexuality in accord with Christ's teaching currently places it in opposition to traditional Catholic teaching that homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, and the much stronger condemnation recently expressed in the Ratzinger Letter that, "...the inclination

fact, after the release of the Ratzinger Letter in 1986, a number of ordinaries evicted Dignity chapters from Church properties after they assessed local chapters' position on sexual ethics. If Dignity is to continue to identify itself as a Catholic organization, Dignity will have to come to terms with the Church on the issue of sexual ethics. Dignity's stand on sexual ethics is also significant because Dignity's attempts to address this issue may have far reaching effects. It is a historical fact that, in all too many instances, harassment, discrimination, the passage of unjust civil laws, outright persecution and even the killing of members the gay and lesbian community have been justified by the religious condemnation of homosexuality.

This chapter, therefore, focuses on Dignity's attempt to define and legitimize a sexual ethic that is rooted in Dignity's belief that gay and lesbian people can responsibly exercise their sexuality while adhering to Christ's teaching.²² This chapter includes an analysis of Dignity's Statement of Position and Purpose and discusses documents issued in response to the

²² Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, 1973, 1; Minutes, 8th Biennial Session, House of Delegates. Dignity, Inc. 21-23 July, 1987. p.24.

Ratzinger Letter, such as Dignity's "Letter on Pastoral Care of Gay and Lesbian Persons." They were approved by the assembled Dignity representatives at the Bal Harbor, Florida national House of Delegates (HOD) which met in 1987. Also included is a brief examination of the documents approved by the 1989 Dignity HOD that met in San Francisco in August, including the report of a national Task Force on Sexual Ethics. The task force report contains a pastoral response and a call for dialogue and study based on the lived experiences of gay and lesbian people that could lead to new developments and, possibly, changes in Church thinking about homosexuality.

Statement of Position and Purpose

Dignity summarizes its sexual ethic concisely in its Statement of Position and Purpose. Copies of chapter constitutions and other Dignity publications show how the Statement has evolved over the years. At first, changes occurred in response to members' needs and in their perceptions of the organization's mission and philosophy. Visible in Dignity's pre-1987 documents is a defensiveness as Dignity members struggle to prove to the hierarchy and to themselves the self-worth of gay and lesbian people, while

avoiding any confrontation that would elicit a negative reaction from the hierarchy. Since 1987, however, Dignity documents -- whether released by the national organization or approved by delegates at the Bal Harbor (1987) and San Francisco (1989) HODs -- stand in angry opposition to the Ratzinger Letter. Dignity's stand is based on its rejection of the statement that even "...the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder"³ and that "...when they engage in homosexual activity they confirm within themselves a disordered sexual inclination which is essentially self-indulgent."⁴

The sexual ethic reflected in Dignity's Statement is based on the needs and life experiences of the gay and lesbian community and has been coupled, from its inception, with the theological reflection of priests, chaplains, scholars, and theologians sympathetic to the Dignity movement. A group of founding members drafted the original Statement in 1973 at Dignity's first

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the World's Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," 1 October 1986, #3.

⁴ Ibid., #7.

national convention in Philadelphia.⁵ As chapters in the U.S. and Canada formed, they incorporated the Statement into their respective constitutions. The Statement now exists as a collective articulation of Dignity's self-understanding and sexual ethics.

In its opening paragraph, the Statement stresses the belief in the beauty of God's creation, Christ's redemptive role in a Spirit-blessed Church, and the legitimate place lesbian women and gay men occupy in God's orderly universe.⁶ The Statement also claims that gay Catholics are part of Christ's mystical body, and that gay people are intrinsically good because God created gays, Christ redeemed them, and the Holy Spirit fills gays' hearts and minds through sacramental Baptism. In the Statement, Dignity claims its members' right, privilege, and duty to fully participate in the Church's sacramental life. The statement rejects the negative self-images and guilt so prevalent in the gay community, incorporating instead a theme from the Pauline epistles (I Cor 6:14) that gay people are God's

⁵ Anonymous, "Dignity: The Reason to be, A Statement of Purpose," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion, 2:1 (Fall, 1977): 7.

⁶ Dignity / USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, 1973 I.

temples, instruments God uses to exemplify the reality of God's love at work among God's creatures.⁷

In the second section, the Statement asserts that gay people can express their sexuality in accord with Christ's teaching. The Statement intertwines Dignity's acknowledgement of the privilege of sexuality with an implied mandate to use that gift only in a responsible and unselfish manner. A third section acknowledges Dignity's responsibility to use its links with the Church, society, and gay individuals, to advance gay causes as it helps other gay and lesbian people to achieve self-acceptance and dignity. More importantly, the Statement commits Dignity to the development of a sexual theology that will allow the Church to completely and fully accept gay and lesbian people.⁸

Finally, Dignity/USA defines itself as an organization with a professed commitment to "...develop leadership and to be an instrument through which the gay and lesbian Catholic may be heard by the Church and Society."⁹ Dignity proposes accomplishing its goals by

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., II.

⁹ Dignity/USA, Statement of Position and Purpose, II.

attending to four interrelated areas. Mass, reception of the sacraments, personal prayer, and the virtue of love are recommended in the area of spiritual development. Educational goals include promoting information on religious and gay issues. Social involvement stresses Dignity's solidarity with other gay, religious, and secular groups. By attending to the area of social concerns, Dignity attempts to strengthen individual gays' self-acceptance as well as bonding between members within the organization by actively promoting an atmosphere that fosters mature friendships.

In contrast to more recent Dignity Statements, this 1973 version of the Statement uses only male-oriented, gender exclusive language, failing throughout to acknowledge the presence of the lesbian community or any other women. In that respect, the 1973 Statement suggests Dignity's all-male roots, and quite possibly, some of its male members' close, idealistic identification with the Church's male-oriented power structure. An unspoken, unconscious tradition of male dominance persists in many chapters. Consequently, despite some attempts to attract lesbian members, women at Dignity functions are overwhelmingly outnumbered in

many chapters, including the Detroit and Toledo chapters. The 1982 Philadelphia national HOD amended the Statement, using inclusive language. Further efforts to incorporate inclusive language in the Statement culminated in final revisions amended at the 1989 San Francisco HOD, which saw two competing slates of aspirants to national office both meeting gender parity guidelines adopted at the 1987 Bal Harbor HOD.

Dignity's present Statement differs considerably from the original concept of its founder, Pax Nidorf. Nidorf originally hoped that Dignity would primarily help gay Catholics address their guilt while they learned to feel comfortable in the Church. Nidorf tried to avoid forming a segregated form of church, envisioning instead, a group that, in helping its members to deal with their problems, could also serve as an ideal of self-acceptance and love, acting as a guiding light for the larger gay community. At the same time, Nidorf thought, Dignity would become fully integrated in the Church, where Dignity would gift the larger, straight community with its unique talents and the witness of its presence.¹⁰

¹⁰ Pax Nidorf, correspondence with author, 23 September 1989.

The earliest versions of Dignity's Statement deviate from Nidorf's original intent. While it is possible that at first the Statement only meant to empower gay Catholics by helping them achieve a sense of their inherent goodness, Dignity has apparently taken seriously its founding members' vision that Dignity work for a development of a sexual theology that accepts the equality of gay men and lesbian women to each other. The Statement directs Dignity to attempt to accomplish a broad spectrum of objectives affecting members, participants, friends, the entire gay community, and the Church as a whole.

The tasks that this original Statement, and later documents approved by the 1989 San Francisco HOD, set forth coincide with Dignity's role as a representative group of a sexual minority in society and within the Catholic Christian community that Fox describes as the "anawim" or "...weaker people of the earth."¹¹ Kotlarczyk states:

These groups [of anawim] continue to be crushed and alienated...by the suppressors

¹¹ Matthew Fox, Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality Presented in Four Paths, Twenty-Six Themes and Two Questions (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1983), 267; Patricia S. Kotlarczyk, "Mending the Torn Spirit Making Ready the Way," (thesis, Marygrove College, 1985), 4; Kerr, interview, 1989.

[sic] argument that in some way these people ...do something that is contrary to nature. ...In the order of creation they are not considered to be made in the...image and likeness of God. In the fullness of the gift of their created humanity, the ANAWIM [sic] are not celebrated as equal and full members of the body of Christ. Rather, they are related to in a repressive, condemning manner which deems them "naturally below" the ideologies -- political, social and, most unfortunate, theological -- determining the course of their lives.¹²

In explaining how the anawim must work to achieve acceptance and integration, Kotlarczyk in effect sets out some of the tasks that Dignity's leadership and members commit themselves to accomplish through the Statement. According to Kotlarczyk, one of the anawim's task is to bond together in advocacy communities or groups "...to challenge the detrimental and unwarranted preconceptions which underlie the structure's...behaviour towards...them."¹³

Theological Arguments Supporting Dignity's Ethical Stand.

Dignity received almost immediate endorsement from a number of sources. Theologian John J. McNeill addressed the 1973 national convention. The following

¹² Kotlarczyk, "Mending the Torn Spirit," 4; Fox, Original Blessing, 268.

¹³ Kotlarczyk, "Mending the Torn Spirit," 1-2.

year, Catholic theologian Gregory Baum defended Dignity, praising the Statement's sincerity and positive tone, noting that heterosexual people involved with Dignity risk the same intolerable burden of discrimination and social prejudice that gay and lesbian people endure every day of their lives.¹⁴

Baum argues that gay and lesbian Dignity members have transcended society's oppression and stereotypes by building relationships. Now Dignity stands before Church and society seeking justice. Theologians, Baum points out, face a binding responsibility to acknowledge seriously the witness of gay and lesbian couples who base their relationships on mutual love and care. Baum envisions the possibility that, after considering gay and lesbian life experiences, theologians will conclude that constitutional homosexuals have an obligation first to acknowledge and to accept their orientation, and then to fashion lives based on the truth of that reality, as those in Dignity have done.¹⁵

After considering as evidence the positive effects

¹⁴ Gregory Baum, "Dignity: An Historic View of Catholic Homosexuals," Insight: A Quarterly of Gay Catholic Opinion 2:1 (Fall, 1977): 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

of well-ordered gay and lesbian relationships and lives, Baum concludes that homosexual love "...is not contrary to the human nature, defined in terms of mutuality, toward which mankind is summoned."¹⁶ Baum notes that Dignity promotes a theological position requiring gays and lesbians to achieve self-acceptance, affirmation and equal participation in the Church. In fulfilling this moral obligation that requires gay and lesbian people to discard the self-pity and self-deprecation that society attempts to impose, gays and lesbians must learn to rely on themselves, on the wisdom accumulated by the gay community, to heal one another of the self-hatred that, when ignored, generates hostility.

In Baum's view, Dignity cultivates and nurtures this wisdom because it fosters the expectation that gay and lesbian people, acting in the context of a believing community that is guided by the Holy Spirit, can use open and trusting dialogue to guide one another. According to Baum, Dignity sees Christianity, with its message of divine acceptance of all through Christ, as the antidote to a psychological plague ravaging the gay community: self-rejection, and the

¹⁶ Ibid.

guilt feelings society imposes.¹⁷

Despite the previously noted lack of inclusive language in its documents, Baum praises Dignity's emphasis on the gender parity he perceives in the policies of the national leadership and in Dignity's sensitivity to male-female relationships -- something Baum finds lacking in most Catholic organizations.¹⁸ Baum warns Dignity not to attempt to seek recognition from the Vatican, but to work instead to develop a minority position within the Church because of the Church's hesitancy to make any changes in its theology, even when it affects millions of heterosexual people, as is the case in its teachings on birth control.¹⁹

Initial Hierarchical Response to Dignity.

Indeed, when Dignity, following its first convention, wrote to all the U.S. bishops, it received no response. Instead, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document, "Principles to Guide Confessors in Questions of Homosexuality." This document, described as "quasi official" by Kosnik et

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

al.,^{e0} briefly articulates the Church's position on homosexuality, and advocates a specific program of spiritual direction for homosexuals.^{e1}

The Guide briefly explains the Church's position that genital acts are only moral between males and females, when performed in the context of marriage, and only when these acts are open to procreation.^{e2} In presenting a discussion of the causes of homosexuality, the document presents, on the whole, a negative view of homosexuality as a developmental disorder^{e3} which is a consequence of poor parenting practices, dysfunctional families, character defects, feelings of inadequacy and immaturity, and other contributing factors -- such as stuttering and stammering -- that force a young male to

^{e0} Anthony Kosnik et al., Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought (New York: Paulist, 1977), 209.

^{e1} John J. McNeill, The Church and the Homosexual, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 7.

^{e2} National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Principles to Guide Confessors In Questions of Homosexuality (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1973), 3-4.

^{e3} Jeannine Gramick, "Preface," chap. in Homosexuality in the Priesthood and the Religious Life (New York: Crossroad, 1989), x.

seek only the company of same-sex peers.¹²⁴

Pastorally, confessors are reminded that Catholic teaching bans homosexual genital acts under any and all circumstances.¹²⁵ McBrien points out:

From the time of Paul...the Catholic tradition has consistently judged all homosexual acts as at once unnatural and gravely sinful.¹²⁶

Up to the release of the Ratzinger Letter, Catholic moral theologians discussed a number of different assessments of homosexual acts. McBrien, in his definitive presentation of Catholic theology, presents two: homosexual acts are morally neutral; and homosexual acts are essentially imperfect.¹²⁷ In the study commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, Kosnik et al. describe two other options: the morality of homosexual acts can be judged according to their relational significance;¹²⁸ and, that

¹²⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Principles to Guide Confessors," 6-7.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁶ Richard P. McBrien, Catholicism: Study Edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 1029.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1031.

¹²⁸ Kosnik et al., Human Sexuality, 204-206.

homosexual acts are intrinsically good and natural.²⁹ However, the Ratzinger Letter rejects these alternatives, implying that the position that homosexual orientation and homosexual acts are both intrinsically evil is the only viable Catholic position.³⁰

The view that homosexual acts are intrinsically evil is presented in the "Guide to Confessors," and the 1975 Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics³¹. Kosnik et al., explain that this view holds that homosexual activity destroys human personhood, leading to the conclusion that complete sexual abstinence combined with sublimation is the only option for gay and lesbian persons.³² It is precisely this position that the evidence of Dignity's lived experience, as expressed in the 1989 San Francisco HOD documents, contradicts. The Guide, in discussing remedies for permanent homosexuality, advocates an intensive daily regime of

²⁹ Ibid., 206-208.

³⁰ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops", #3, #7.

³¹ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics," United States Catholic Conference, 29 December 1975.

³² Kosnik et al., Human Sexuality, 202

meditation, spiritual reading, acts of charity, frequent reception of the sacraments, regularly scheduled and frequent consultations with a spiritual director as well as the formation of stable heterosexual and homosexual relationships.³³

In essence, this is the program the priest-theologian John Harvey integrated into the guidelines of the group Courage, which Harvey helped to found. Harvey recommends that gay and lesbian people cultivate an ascetic spiritual life that includes: spending fifteen minutes daily in morning prayer and meditation; another ten minutes per day on spiritual reading; performing a daily examination of conscience; frequent attendance at weekday masses; devotion to the Blessed Virgin and saints; frequent confession with a carefully chosen confessor; and the frequent performance of charitable works.³⁴ This program, many argue, is more intense than the spiritual programs that ordained, celibate priests follow.

In contrast to the Dignity movement which

³³ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Guide to Confessors," 10-11.

³⁴ John Harvey, "Some Pastoral Reflections on Homosexuality," in Contemporary Pastoral Counseling, ed. Eugene J. Weitzel (New York: Bruce, 1969), 116.

basically is a grassroots organization, Courage is backed, and in some dioceses such as New York City, also funded and promoted by the hierarchy. In contrast to Dignity, Courage has a much smaller membership. In some cities, Courage has not been able to maintain or attract enough members to survive, despite the fact that, since the Ratzinger Letter, some ordinaries, in an attempt to minister to gay and lesbian Catholics in their dioceses, have endorsed Courage chapters. Harvey is not without his critics. In conversation, Dignity members comment on the unrealistic demands of Harvey's program. A priest, a former student and admirer of Harvey who now actively supports Dignity, offers this background information which helps to explain where some of Dignity's opposition originates. The anonymous priest states:

Harvey...was actually a pioneer...in counseling gay/lesbian people....But Harvey has not grown one iota and is now a rather bitter man....He attacks Bob Nugent and Jeannine Gramick in a nasty and personal way and has intervened with a few bishops trying to block them from using Catholic facilitiesHe sees homosexuality as a disordered orientation....Harvey does not believe constitutional homosexuals can change, but does believe that they must suppress their tendencies and uses a support group approach similar to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. Like AA the gay/lesbian person must see him/herself as 'diseased' and in need of healing. There's no place for a healthy

homosexual in Harvey's plan....Courage can do real harm, mostly in re-enforcing negative stereotypes and destroying the self-confidence and self-acceptance of its members.³⁵

Kosnik et al. point out that the Guide, in affirming the basic need for human relationships, encourages the gay penitent to form and maintain lasting homosexual and heterosexual friendships.³⁶ McNeill acknowledges that the Guide has been considered by some authors to be the first official Church document to encourage homosexual friendships that do not include genital activity.³⁷

While the Guide states that a confessor may absolve those who occasionally "lapse" into homosexual behaviour, nevertheless the Guide demands that the confessor order homosexuals to sever any relationship that routinely involves overt genital behaviour.³⁸ The Guide further discourages "overt" homosexuals from

³⁵ Anonymous priest, correspondence with author, 20 September 1989.

³⁶ Kosnik et al., Human Sexuality, 209; National Council of Catholic Bishops, "Guide to Confessors," 11.

³⁷ McNeill, Church and the Homosexual, 7-8.

³⁸ National Council of Catholic Bishops, "Guide to Confessors," 11.

receiving the Eucharist.³⁹

McNeill argues that most confessors, pastoral counsellors and priests fail to realize what gays and lesbians face when attempting to obey the order to adhere to a life of chaste celibacy. According to McNeill, a number of authors use the term "chastity" when they mean complete and total abstinence, not just from sexual acts, but from any form of sexual expression, a far cry from the continence expected of unmarried heterosexual persons. McNeill believes that gay men would have to avoid any number of risk-laden circumstances that might lead to any form of a genital relationship. McNeill contends that, under those guidelines, gay men would be bound to avoid the following potentially sinful situations: close friendships with any woman because society views these as a part of courtship; close friendships with other men because these might become occasions of sin; any previous gay friends, the all-male circumstances of the religious or military life; meaningful friendships that might contain an aura of romanticism. Thus McNeill argues, proponents of chastity for gay persons forbid

³⁹ McBrien, Catholicism, 1031; National Council of Catholic Bishops, "Guide to Confessors," 14-15.

not only genital sexual expression but any deep and affectionate relationship with either males or females -- in other words, a lonely isolated life devoid of any close friendships -- under fear of eternal damnation.⁴⁰

The Guide receives the praise cited earlier because it does endorse close interpersonal relationships. The Guide states:

A homosexual can have an abiding relationship with another homosexual without genital sexual expression. Indeed the deeper need of any human is for friendship rather than genital expression, although this is usually an element in heterosexual relationships.⁴¹

McNeill warns that, while a number of gays can live lives of abstinence, the experience of counsellors and confessors shows that, for others, total abstinence coupled with a sublimation of sexual desire may not be possible without risking severe emotional conflict or personality breakdown, with periods of abstinence interrupted by near-compulsive, clandestine, and promiscuous sexual activity.⁴²

⁴⁰ John J. McNeill, *The Christian Male Homosexual: Part II*, Homiletic and Pastoral Review 70:10 (July 1970): 757-758.

⁴¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Principles to Guide Confessors in Questions of Homosexuality." 1973, 11.

⁴² McNeill, "The Christian Male Homosexual: Part II," 1970, 757-758.

Dignity's Responses to the Ratzinger Letter.

In its initial responses to the Ratzinger Letter, Dignity USA issued press releases that differ from the 1973 Statement. In these statements, Dignity places itself in a position to challenge Catholic teaching when it portrays the goal of its work as follows:

To encourage a sexual theology within the Church that will minister to all believers regardless of their sexual orientation. Dignity disagrees with the magisterial teaching of the Church concerning homosexuality.⁴⁹

In its previous official documents, even during the traumatic period surrounding McNaught's hunger strike, Dignity took a conciliatory, almost apologetic stance, modestly seeking dialogue and communication with the hierarchy. Dignity's responses to the Church at the time of the McNaught conflict centred primarily around the unjust treatment of individuals based on their sexual orientation, as illustrated in McNaught's statement that was quoted earlier. In fact, in reviewing Dignity's pre-Ratzinger Letter documents, one is struck by their tone of hope that, with greater awareness of the lived experience and struggle of gay and lesbian couples to live moral lives, the hierarchy

⁴⁹ Dignity/USA Press Releases, 1986. 1987.

would acknowledge the legitimacy of Dignity's claim that gays and lesbians can exercise their sexuality in accord with Christ's teaching. However, this hope had not been realized, and a sense of despair about this possibility had settled into the Dignity community.

In the state of crisis created by the Ratzinger Letter, the national house of delegates convened in Bal Harbor, Florida almost a year after the Ratzinger Letter's release, and, by a 177-8 majority, approved an amendment to the Statement.⁴⁴ In addition to reaffirming the earlier Statement, the amendment again committed Dignity to work for the development of Catholic sexual theology. It also stated that Dignity "...emphatically disagrees with and calls for a re-examination of the magisterial teachings....." on homosexuality as expressed both in the 1976 NCCB document, "To Live in Christ Jesus," and in the Ratzinger Letter itself.⁴⁵

Walczak, in attempting to assess the events at Bal Harbor, writes of the hurt and anger expressed by the delegates to chapter evictions and ordinaries'

⁴⁴ Minutes, 8th Biennial Session, House of Delegates. Dignity, Inc. July 21-23, 1987. Res. H-45-Jul 1987, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

inquisitions that followed the Ratzinger Letter. Walczak explains that the Bal Harbor Statement's supporters acted in response to "...a spiritual call to reply forcefully to a forceful attack on ourselves as members of the mystical Body of Jesus Christ."⁴⁶

Despite the enthusiasm exhibited by the delegates, members who underwent the trauma of an inquisition process that resulted in their chapters' expulsions questioned the delegates' wisdom. Walczak points out:

The Bal Harbor Statement represented a change in Dignity's policy in that it clearly moved the organization from one that calmly and prayerfully sought reconciliation within the hierarchical church to one characterized by open defiance and confrontational attitudes.⁴⁷

Bal Harbor Statement opponents charged that Dignity had, in effect, rejected Church teaching, thus ending the possibility of dialogue in addition to providing the hierarchy with concrete evidence they need to prove that Dignity opposes church teaching. However, the 1987 Bal Harbor HOD's actions, which can be described merely as a defensive reaction to the Ratzinger Letter, illustrate a remarkable solidarity

⁴⁶ Christopher Walczak, "The Bal Harbor Statement: An Attempt to Analyze the Current Debate," unpublished / unpaginated.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

and increased militancy that indicate Dignity's growing self-confidence and self acceptance.

Declaration of Non-Reception.

One of Dignity's strongest statements was its "Declaration of Non-Reception of the Pastoral Letter on the Care of Homosexual Persons," which the 1987 Bal Harbor HOD ordered sent to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican Pro Nuncio, and president of the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁴⁹ This one-page document rejects the Ratzinger Letter on seven counts. Labelling the Ratzinger Letter as "pastorally inadequate" and "ineffective" in its attempts to meet U.S. gay and lesbian Catholics' needs, Dignity levels a number of charges against the Ratzinger Letter: The Letter ineffectively expresses Christ's teachings; that no consultation with gays and lesbians, either to examine their lived experiences or to assess the Letter's effects on them, took place. In addition, Dignity charges that the Ratzinger Letter not only causes further alienation, it also excuses, if not gives outright justification to, the intolerable burden of

⁴⁹ Minutes. 8th Biennial Session. House of Delegates, Dignity, Inc. 21-23 July 1987. Res. H-47-Jul 1987. p. 26.

continuing violence and injustice against the gay and lesbian people.⁴⁹

Dignity's Pastoral Letter.

The 1987 Bal Harbor HOD also approved a sensitive document that proposed some concrete solutions to the inadequacies of the Ratzinger Letter, suggesting ways the Church could move to meet the needs of gay and lesbian Catholics. The "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Gay and Lesbian Persons" proposed a number of recommendations in the areas of justice, sexual ethics, and ministry. This response to the Ratzinger Letter was based on "...the substantial store of our [Dignity's] ministry experience with gay/lesbian people...."⁵⁰

Dignity's pastoral letter ends with an invitation to dialogue, a call to the U.S. ordinaries that reads:

In their 1976 pastoral letter "To Live in Christ Jesus," the American Catholic bishops affirmed the basic rights of gay people to freedom from prejudice, to respect, friendship, and justice, to an active role in the Christian community, and to a special degree of pastoral understanding and care. Dignity now calls upon the leaders of the

⁴⁹ "Declaration of Non-Reception of The Pastoral Letter on the Care of Homosexual Persons." Dignity / USA. undated.

⁵⁰ Dignity/USA. "Letter on Pastoral Care of Gay and Lesbian Persons." 23 July 1987, unpaginated.

Catholic Church in this country to deepen their commitment to these principles. We invite them to join hands with us in prayer and to dialogue with us in charity to heal the wounds of alienation.⁵¹

The 1989 Convention.

When it reconvened for the 1989 San Francisco HOD in late August, Dignity delegates from all over North America spent several days examining Dignity's collective conscience, so to speak, in a series of process theology workshops designed to bring closure to Dignity's anger and agony resulting from the Ratzinger Letter and the subsequent expulsions of so many of its chapters. In essence, Dignity members wiped one another's tears. They mourned during a reading of a litany of the names of those who died from AIDS that took more than fifteen minutes to complete. And they commemorated the exodus of more than two dozen chapters from the parishes they once called home. In his acceptance speech, President Elect Pat Roche stated:

In our process sessions...I heard you affirm that now is a time for healing...that...we must let go of our child-parent relationship with the Church...that we are now 21, that we have come of age and we should act it....we must loudly and proudly proclaim the truth....we can practice our sexuality in a unitive manner which is loving, life-giving and life-affirming. If WE [sic] won't affirm

⁵¹ Ibid.

the goodness of our relationships, who will?...we must be church, we must be faith communities, and we must find new ways to ritualize our experiences.⁵²²

Revision of the Statement of Position and Purpose.

In the wake of a directive by the Los Angeles bishops denying priests permission to celebrate the core ritual of Catholic Christianity, the Eucharist, to Dignity communities, the assembled San Francisco HOD dropped any pretences of open agreement with the Church's position on sexual ethics when it passed a motion that amended the Statement of Position and Purpose. The San Francisco HOD minutes read that the motion passed by a vote of 140 to 23. Only a few chapters, including Detroit, dissented.⁵²³ The portion of the amended statement that is most likely to generate controversy with the Church hierarchy reads:

We believe that we can express our sexuality physically in a unitive manner that is loving, life giving, and life affirming.⁵²⁴

Dignity's Sexual Ethics Report.

⁵²² Pat Roche, "City of God," Speech presented 3 September 1989, Dignity/USA 21:6 (November 1989): 12-13.

⁵²³ Minutes. 9th Biennial Session, House of Delegates, Dignity, Inc. 29-31 August, 1989. Res. H-10-Aug 1989, p. 7.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

Without a rationale, Dignity's amended Statement would place it in opposition to the Church. However, the HOD also approved a document developed by a Task Force on Sexual Ethics. The Task Force was formed at the 1983 national Seattle HOD. The document incorporates the results of interviews, workshops, and a survey of Dignity members' views on sexual ethics. This research, which was designed to provide documentation for an ethical stand based on the life experiences of gay and lesbian men and women,⁵³ also involved visits by the Sexual Ethics Task Force to eight major North American cities.⁵⁴

The document claims that Dignity speaks with the voice of the oppressed. It charges that the Church grossly misuses power to oppress gay and lesbian people:

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

⁵³ Task Force on Sexual Ethics. "Sexual Ethics: Experience, Growth, Challenge: A Pastoral Reflection for Lesbian and Gay Catholics" 16-17.

⁵⁴ Nate Gruel, "Sexual Ethics Document Issued," 21:7 Dignity/USA Newsletter, 1.

form of oppression.⁵⁷

In a statement that echoes McNaught's proclamation of his hunger fast, the Sexual Ethics Report chronicles some of the damage that gay and lesbian people have suffered as they attempted to live in accordance with Church directives. It notes that, just as gay and lesbian people have been oppressed by the Church, so have any dissenting theologians, prophets, and teachers. As a result, the oppressed have had to find their own strength, and have had to learn to affirm their own selfhood.⁵⁸ Consequently, the document points out, the gay and lesbian people of Dignity have had to establish their own sexual ethic.⁵⁹ The document points out that "...scholars have shown the inadequacy of an ethic that regards sexual intimacy...as an agreement to procreate."⁶⁰ Thus, the document concludes, the gay and lesbian community must rely on the "primacy of the individual conscience" that is cited in the documents of Vatican II.⁶¹ In

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁶¹ Ibid.

explaining Dignity's vision of its stance in its new relationship to the Church, Nate Gruel, Chair of the Task Force on Sexual Ethics, wrote:

The operative principle here was that the Church must be instructed by the lived experience of its people...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...a source of 'conscience formation and spiritual growth.'⁶²

The study endorses the seven values in sexual behaviour that were presented and explained in the work by Kosnik et al. In addition, the document states that, while gay and lesbian people may be unwelcome in traditional parishes, they have, in Dignity, established their own faith community, and in so doing, have experienced and, in fact, become Church, meeting each others' deepest needs.⁶³

The document ends with a redefinition of Dignity in the naked light of the pain and torture inflicted on the gay and lesbian community by the Church:

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

⁶² Nate Gruel, "Sexual Ethics Document," 1.

⁶³ Dignity/USA, "Sexual Ethics," 13-14.

how to live sexually in an ethically responsible manner that is consonant with the teachings of Christ....by reflecting on our personal experience and learning from those who are engaged in similar reflection....by praying together and celebrating Christ's presence in our midst in Word and consonant with the teachings of Christ....by reflecting on our personal experience and learning from those who are engaged in similar reflectionby 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.⁶⁴

The HOD Aftermath: the Threat of Outing.

Dignity/USA officers and members left the convention excited and enthused. The process of affirmation, acceptance, and acknowledgment that individual members are part of a larger body of like-minded people that seems so much a part of the Dignity experience of past conventions was repeated at a national level. Press reports reflected the excitement that most of the returning delegates shared with other members of their home chapters. As of this writing, no ordinary has taken any further action against any Dignity chapter as a result of the documents approved at the San Francisco HOD.

However, recent developments have spotlighted a disquieting facet of Dignity's disagreement with the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 15.

Church on sexual ethics that may seriously affect the possibility of free and open discussion on Dignity's position on sexual ethics. Not only does Dignity now challenge the Church hierarchy, but also gay and lesbian Christians are becoming aware that they have faced serious acts of oppression, not only from heterosexual, but also from homosexual priests and members of the hierarchy, including cardinals. According to published reports and private conversations, some Dignity members and gay authors interpret this repressive behaviour as manifestations of individual clerics' hatred of their own sexuality.⁶⁵

On 15 September 1989, the National Catholic Reporter published an article that quoted the past president of Dignity/New York, James Serafini and then-Dignity/USA president James Bussen as stating that some Dignity members have expressed strong feelings in favour of exposing those sexually active gay members of the hierarchy who have successfully kept their sexual orientation hidden -- those who are still "in the

⁶⁵ Dignity / USA, Board of Director members, conversations with author, July-August 1989; DeStefano, "Punishing a Church Critic," 46; De Stefano, "Gay Under the Collar," 44; C. A. Tripp, The Homosexual Matrix, 2d ed., Meridian (New York: New American Library, 1987). 277-280 n.M.

closet" -- while at the same time taking action against other gays.⁶⁶ This action is called outing. Kenkelen quotes Serafini as explaining that outing tactics would be used selectively, against those who "...achieve legitimacy and power in the church by suppressing other gay people."⁶⁷

Kenkelen, commenting on the mood of the convention, implied that the Dignity membership would back such tactics because it vociferously cheered and applauded the Dignity/New York delegation that represented a group that stages frequent, regular protests at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York city as part of what has come to be known as "The Cathedral Project."⁶⁸ However, when the conservative, anti-confrontation New York chapter, Dignity/Big Apple, entered the convention hall, Kenkelen states that other delegates responded with "...only polite applause."⁶⁹

The article elicited immediate denouncements and

⁶⁶ Bill Kenkelen, "Dignity Considers Bolder Approach," National Catholic Reporter, 15 September 1989, 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

denials by Dignity leaders in subsequent articles.⁷⁰

Newly elected Dignity/USA president Pat Roche stated:

Serafini does not represent the leadership of Dignity....We don't preserve or enhance our dignity by destroying that of others....I'm thoroughly disgusted. I absolutely and unequivocally do not agree with (Serafini's) remarks.⁷¹

Serafini responded that he had spoken in his capacity as a delegate to the San Francisco HOD, the cofounder of and past president of the New York chapter. Serafini stated that he feels a moral obligation to attempt to curtail the hierarchical abuses of Church leaders who have used their positions to oppose gay civil rights. Such actions, Serafini charges, reveal a deep self-hatred.⁷² Serafini stated:

My intention in 'outing' is...to expose abuses of power and the twisted, self-hating actions that evolve necessarily out of a natural-law theology that degrades humanity and sexuality. To this end, one must demystify these men's lives and expose the lies they live.⁷³

Serafini's actions -- an all-or-nothing tactic --

⁷⁰ Kate DeSmet, "Group Opposes Call to Name Gay Catholic Leaders," Detroit News, 16 September 1989.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² James A. Serafini, "Silence Gives Assent," National Catholic Reporter, 29 December 1989, 17.

⁷³ Ibid.

seem to indicate the desperation and frustration that some members of the Dignity community may be experiencing. Thus, Dignity may discover that its work in addressing the issue of sexual ethics may not resolve its dilemma. Dignity may find that it must also confront, by its words and its actions, this issue of abuse of power, which has become deeply intertwined with the issue of sexual ethics in Dignity's struggle for survival.

CHAPTER IX
SEXUAL ETHICS
INTERVIEW DATA

The official stand of Dignity as an organization places it at odds with traditional Vatican teaching on the issue of sexual ethics, especially as articulated in the Ratzinger Letter. In this research project, three of the twenty-one questions that were used as a skeleton for the open-ended interviews specifically addressed this issue of sexual ethics. Respondents were asked to provide, in their own words, an explanation of Church teaching on homosexuality. They

were asked to talk about their reaction to the Ratzinger Letter and, finally, to articulate their model of responsible, ethical sexual behaviour.

The respondents' answers to these questions give some insight into their perceptions of how the very Church they belong to and profess to love, judges them. The responses also indicate, how, in the light of this knowledge, Dignity members view themselves as they wrestle with the issue of sexual ethics. The interviews also show how the Dignity Task Force on Sexual Ethics report reflects the thinking of at least the members who took part in the research project. Substantial agreement within Dignity on this crucial matter of sexual ethics is an important factor in the unity and strength of the organization as it deals with the disapproval of the Church.

Respondents' Perceptions of Church Teaching.

Interview respondents were asked to explain the Church's teaching on homosexuality. Their comments reveal some misconceptions, most notably that one of the lay respondents stated that the Church condemns all homosexuals.¹ Some of the other respondents either may not possess a clear understanding of the Church's

¹ Tape Female #1, transcript, 167.

position on homosexuality, or they may consider this a topic that is too painful to discuss. When asked the same question²², nine male lay respondents gave explanations either of their own sexual ethic, or they made statements explaining their views of what they thought the Church should teach about gay and lesbian sexual ethics. However, thirteen correctly explained that the Church position prior to the Ratzinger Letter did not condemn homosexuality as a sexual orientation, but forbade any genital homosexual activity. A 1975 document reads:

In the pastoral field, those homosexuals must certainly be treated with understanding and sustained in the hope of overcoming their personal difficulties and their inability to fit into society....In Sacred Scripture [homosexual acts] are condemned as a serious depravity....it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved.²³

Another document, by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, states:

Some persons find themselves through no fault of their own to have a homosexual

²² Question #14, asked of lay respondents and also of the chaplains, read: "Please explain your perception of Church teaching on sexuality."

²³ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics United States Catholic Conference, Publication No. 438-4, #8.

orientation....Homosexual activity, however, as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong."⁴

The Ratzinger Letter, however, opts for a stronger condemnation of homosexuality:

Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder.⁵

Many of the interview respondents restated the views of one respondent who felt that Church teaching is "...less understanding [than it should be] and is very likely outdated..."⁶ Others said that the Church basically teaches that marriage is the norm and that "...other lifestyles are aberrations ...including, strangely enough, celibacy."⁷ One male summarized Church teaching this way:

Sexuality is designed, not only to populate the world, but it acts as a sign of love between two people of the opposite sex whose relationship has been blessed by the Church

⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life, 11 November 1976, United States Catholic Conference, Publication No. 115-6, #52.

⁵ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the World's Bishops," #3.

⁶ Male Interview #5, interview notes, 5.

⁷ Tape Male #8, transcript, 98.

...Anything else is...immoral.⁸

Others knew that, as stated prior to the Ratzinger Letter, Church teaching condemned homosexual genital acts, but not homosexuality per se.⁹ Or, in other words, they stated that homosexuality is a valid sexual orientation but that, to be "in good standing" with the Church, all gay and lesbian people must remain celibate.¹⁰ One said the Church teaches that "...active homosexuals are not part of God's kingdom and will go to Hell."¹¹ This and other respondents felt condemned by the Church which, in their view, refused to accept gay and lesbian people under any circumstances.¹² One male stated:

I understand that we're freaks and that we have to be celibate if we're going to be saved. I just dismiss [Church teaching]. [It's] simply not true in any possible way. At first, it hurt. I thought, I am a good Catholic, [but I feel] condemned and rejected. I hung on while a lot of my friends have left.¹³

⁸ Tape Male #5, transcript, 44.

⁹ Tape Male #1, transcript, 12.

¹⁰ Tape Male #12, transcript, 63.

¹¹ Tape Male #15, transcript, 72.

¹² Tape Male #3, transcript, 25.

¹³ Tape Male #10, transcript, 53.

A number have simply reached the conclusion that the Vatican's teaching is no longer relevant in their lives, although they apparently still revere Papal authority. One male said:

As time goes on, I am less accepting of everything the Church hands down because, even though the Pope is the closest thing to God, all the men that are in charge of the Church are human beings. They're still fallible and they can make mistakes, and, [so] I don't think God would not accept gays and lesbians.¹⁴

One respondent described how the issues of sexual ethics and power have become intermingled in the hierarchy's relationships with Dignity. This male stated:

There is no real acceptance or tolerance. If we [Dignity] get too political, or too uppity, they [the hierarchy] will get mad at us...They don't really accept our lifestyle. But they don't want to turn us away from Jesus, so we can go to church and, if we're nice, they'll let us stay.¹⁵

One of the male respondents could not explain why, in view of his perceptions of Church teaching, he should still regard himself as a Catholic. This person estimates that ninety-eight per cent of the gay men and "...99.9 percent" of the lesbian women he knows have

¹⁴ Tape Male #4, transcript, 33.

¹⁵ Tape Male #4, transcript, 33.

left the Church because of its teachings. He remains a Dignity member despite the following statement:

Why would they be part of the Church? Why would you be a part of anything that doesn't want you? Would you stay in the home of people you knew didn't want you?¹⁶

Another respondent showed an awareness of conflicting standards within the Church. His statement apparently refers to the study commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America¹⁷. As stated earlier, the Dignity/USA Task Force on Sexual Ethics quoted from this study in the document approved by the 1989 San Francisco HGD¹⁸. The member stated:

You must remain celibate, and the minute you act on your homosexuality you...sin and you are literally condemning yourself to hellNow...individuals in the Church say you need to have morality, and your relationships must be life-giving...helping you and your partner to grow, but that this can be a moral and loving and giving relationship.¹⁹

Another respondent stated that he had reason to look with hope for the possibility of change in the Church's position. He said:

¹⁶ Tape Male #10, transcript, 55.

¹⁷ Kosnik et al., Human Sexuality, 1977.

¹⁸ Dignity/USA Task Force on Sexual Ethics, "Sexual Ethics," undated.

¹⁹ Tape Male #16, transcript, 140.

[Right now] we [gay and lesbian people] are being tolerated, but not truly accepted. We have a division in the hierarchy....the more humble members of our Church hierarchy say "Let us not pass judgement on these people, they obviously have value in the community, they are still children of God"....These people I love and admire. And those that are stupid enough to pass judgement...have to answer to God.²⁰

One of the chaplain respondents attempted to explain why so many of the respondents reacted so negatively to Church teaching. This chaplain said:

Church teaching on sexuality is generally unrealistic because it has been formulated by people (usually celibates) who live in ivory towers. They don't seem to know much about the real world -- real men and women in marriage faced with decisions....Because Church policy seems formulated on another planet, it is generally ignored. This authoritarian pope believes he can coerce theologians and the faithful into submission but he is wrong.²¹

Respondents' Reactions to the Ratzinger Letter.

Although only a few of the respondents were familiar enough with the Ratzinger Letter to discuss it in detail, many had read the Ratzinger Letter when it was initially promulgated. Some respondents recalled attending lectures or seminars that were held to discuss its ramifications. Despite the fact that more

²⁰ Tape Male #18, transcript, 150.

²¹ Correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

than two years had elapsed between the Vatican's promulgation of the letter and the start of this research project, the respondents' anger was still very much in evidence, as revealed in these comments. One member said:

I don't think Ratzinger understands the gospel. My understanding is that God has come to us in the person of Christ and offers us healing and acceptance and love with no strings attached. God's gifts of life and salvation are free and unearned to all regardless of gender, ethnic or racial background, or sexual orientation. Yet Ratzinger...can't see what the message of Christianity...[or] what the gospel is really all about. You can see that in the way he acts toward gay and lesbian persons...he cannot...understand that maybe what they are doing may be motivated by love and commitment.²²

It's an uninspired document that comes out of some small minds in Rome. It's a throwback from pre-Vatican II days. It's not at all the loving and caring and nurturing Church that I belong to.²³

The female respondents were equally adamant in their objections to the Ratzinger Letter. One woman's comments reveal the fragility of the ties of many in the gay and lesbian community to the Church. She said:

It's so dishonest...and so full of untrue myths about homosexuality....It's a brutal letter...insulting. No effort whatever was

²² Tape Male #5, transcript, 43-44.

²³ Tape Male #8, transcript, 98.

made to communicate and find out what we really are. I mean, we're doctors, we're nurses, we're people who pay taxes. We're not perverts....I just wish it hadn't been written. It truly crushed so many homosexual hearts who might have looked kindly at the Church. In our chapter, we lost a lot of members over that letter. They turned their backs on the Church, including a lot of people who were ready to come back in after being away for a long time....They kissed the Church goodbye. There's nothing for them in the Church. It's impossible to consider that the Church [has] a loving outreach or any type of acceptance for homosexuals.²⁴

The respondents' intense reactions also reveal the disparity between orthodox teaching and the lived experience of the Dignity community, as this person expressed:

Ratzinger made a mistake. I don't know if he knows it or not. He says homosexuals are intrinsically disordered. That's not true. [We've] got a lot of people here [at Dignity]. They're not disordered....[the Church] condemned Galileo, so Ratzinger's mistake can be corrected, only who knows how long it'll take?²⁵

Another stated:

What's being forgotten is that being gay is more than a bedroom thing. It's not having to fit into any molds....I struggled for a long time....I [now] think God sanctions my love relationships as much as any straight's and there's a blessing on a gay couple that's

²⁴ Tape Female #1, transcript, 167.

²⁵ Male Interview #3, interview notes, 3.

been together longer than my parents.²⁶

Others state that the Ratzinger Letter does not affirm what they, as gay men or lesbian women, have come to know about themselves and their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. So they reject the letter with, in their words, "...an informed conscience."²⁷ One man rejects the letter claiming that it is, quite simply, invalid as it applies to his life. He states:

This was a document written by one man and signed by another. I know what kind of person I am and who I am. I'll take my chances on judgment day. I will be judged by my Creator and no cardinal will be there.²⁸

Another male says:

I can't accept the Ratzinger Letter. It comes from a man who has a lot of self-hate inside and he has to take it out on others. I don't view myself as intrinsically evil...I'm a good person...Just because my sexuality is different doesn't damn me to Hell...it's intimidating to a point, but I can't be called intrinsically evil and accept it. So, I don't accept Ratzinger.²⁹

Most of all, the respondents seem to be struck by what they describe as the utter insensitivity of those who promulgated the document. One said:

²⁶ Interview #4, interview notes, 4-5.

²⁷ Tape Male #12, transcript, 63.

²⁸ Tape Male #9, transcript, 116.

²⁹ Tape Male #4, transcript, 32.

It shows a great deal of insensitivity, callousness, and ignorance. We hear from the pulpit...to love one another. I feel that [the Church has] treated us in a very unloving, very uncaring way.²⁰

However, edicts such as the Ratzinger Letter aren't going to intimidate another respondent in such a way as to force a decision to leave the Church. In a statement that closely echoes Hans Kung's publicly stated determination to remain in the Church²¹, one man says:

I will not let Ratzinger kick me out...I'll still find a place in the Church. When all is said and done, I'm the one who will stand before God, not Ratzinger and his henchmen.²²

Chaplains View the Ratzinger Letter.

If the Ratzinger Letter is the most recent articulation of traditional Roman Church teaching on homosexuality, then the chaplains' reactions are important. Because of their involvement with the Dignity community, the chaplains evaluate the letter as it relates to the life stories of the gay and lesbian people they counsel and minister to on a regular basis.

As expected, the chaplains gave the letter poor

²⁰ Tape male #17, transcript, 144.

²¹ Hans Kung, public lectures at the University of Michigan, fall 1983.

²² Tape Male #18, transcript, 149.

marks for many reasons. Some of the chaplain respondents said that they feel that the Ratzinger Letter has, in fact, actually harmed many gay and lesbian people. One chaplain said:

The letter is completely devoid of charity. It does not take into account the humanity of the people with whom Ratzinger is dealing. It proves that he is a homophobic person. You can tell that by the genre of the letter. He has virtually tied the hands of every confessor around the world from reaching out to homosexually inclined people. I have disregarded the letter completely [because] it has no binding force on me.³³

One of the chaplains who has worked with one of the chapters involved in the study, counselling many of its members, closely observed the damage the Ratzinger Letter wreaked on the local chapter and the national organization when this chaplain attended the 1987 Bal Harbor HOD. This chaplain stated:

It's another blow to self-understanding at a critical time. It was a devastating blow. For the community it meant two years of great turmoil...worry and argumentation...At Bal Harbor, [I saw] the anger, the upset, the prayers for people [evicted from their parishes], for the priests who were told they could no longer celebrate for Dignity.³⁴

Others see the document as a ploy by conservatives

³³ Transcript, 253.

³⁴ Transcript, 298.

in the Vatican who, uncomfortable with the freedom generated by Vatican II, are attempting to regain strict control of the faithful. This is coupled with a need to protect their vision of morality, and to provide stability in the wake of the changes that have moved the Church in the past twenty years since the council.³³ Another chaplain states:

The Letter is a despicable piece of Christian thought which the Church will eventually have to disavow if it is to remain Christian. Cardinal Ratzinger writes arrogantly, betraying his ignorance. He made no effort to speak to gay and lesbian Catholics about their experience of being gay and Christianthe letter misuses scripture, makes inaccurate scientific statements...and betrays atrocious psychology. As John McNeill often says, what is bad psychologically cannot be good spiritually. The Ratzinger statement is a shining example [of this].³⁴

Respondents' Views of Ethical Sexual Behaviour.

The interview questions regarding sexual ethics elicited an angry reaction from one respondent as he reflected on the way people have reacted to his attempts at coming out, because of their perceptions of the sexual ethics of gay men. He said:

Most people are [only] concerned with what happens in the bedroom when they hear the

³³ Transcript, 263.

³⁴ Correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

word "homosexual." All they hear is [the word] "sex"...I'm so ashamed of humanity that they would think that...how dare they think that all I think about is sex....All of a sudden, do two little words, "I'm gay," charge me into some mad rapist who molests children? Excuse me! There are not enough positive images of gays out there [to counteract stereotypes]...That would be a big step in people accepting gays and lesbians and gays and lesbians accepting themselves ...when gays and lesbians accept themselves as worthwhile human beings, then perhaps they'll stop dealing with...sex all the time, and look for love, look for relationships and look for friends.³⁷

All of the men and women who participated in this research project indicated that they felt that, under appropriate circumstances, it is moral and ethical for gay and lesbian people to engage in genital homosexual activity. Eight of the male respondents believed that genital activity can be moral outside of a committed relationship³⁸, while thirteen believed genital sexual activity required some kind of commitment of sexual exclusivity. However, the eight males reporting tolerance of sexual activity outside a committed relationship may only be indicating a non-judgmental

³⁷ Tape Male #1, transcript, 13.

³⁸ Twenty-one of the male and female respondents' described committed relationships using words such as "monogamous," "long-term," and "permanent." Some compared these types of relationships, sometimes referred to in the gay and lesbian community, as "same-sex unions" stating they are "just like marriage."

attitude. When they discussed their own sexual behaviour, only four of them revealed that they were sexually active and not in some sort of a committed or exclusive relationship.³⁷ All of the sexually abstinent respondents indicated that they were abstinent at the time of the interview only because they are not in committed relationships at this time in their lives.

Only one of the five female respondents is currently sexually abstinent, but, like the male sexually abstinent respondents, this woman insists her abstinence is because she is not in a relationship, and "...not by choice." Three other women live in sexually active relationships. One woman chose not to state whether or not she is sexually active or whether or not she is living in a relationship.

A number of the respondents, when discussing this complex issue of sexual ethics, echoed a male's sentiments which he put quite simply, "I don't feel that sex outside a permanent relationship is right."⁴⁰ A male stated that "...bed-hopping is irresponsible and

³⁷ The term "sexually abstinent" refers to single lay persons who, for whatever reason, were not engaging in genital sexual activity at the time of the survey.

⁴⁰ Male Interview #3, interview notes, 4.

gay men tend to use and discard people. It's cruel and heartless."⁴¹ Another respondent who argued against promiscuous sexual behaviour stated:

I do feel that the Catholic Church should provide marriage for gay and lesbian people because I don't believe in sex before marriage. I don't feel like tramping around and doing it with whoever you meet on the street. I haven't had sex in the last three years and I'm not less for it....I should have promised celibacy and...become a priest.⁴²

However, one sexually active male detailed how his view of sexual ethics has changed over the years, and how he has become less judgemental. He said:

I used to think, when I hadn't accepted my sexuality and was still playing mind games with myself, that I was so chaste in my opinions towards sex. I'd point fingers at some of my friends and say they shouldn't be...dating...having premarital sex...cheating on your partner...Now, when I actually experience my sexuality that's built into me, the shoe is on the other foot. I understand...I'm more forgiving now that I'm in touch with my own feelings.⁴³

The interviews also revealed that the many of the respondents would prize a deep and ongoing relationship with one individual, and, in fact, are somewhat envious of those who have been able successfully to maintain

⁴¹ Tape Male #10, transcript, 54.

⁴² Tape Male #2, transcript, 20.

⁴³ Tape Male #4, transcript, 33.

this type of relationship. The vast majority of the men -- twelve -- reported that they were sexually active and living in monogamous relationships. These relationships have lasted from only a few months to more than ten years. One of the males who is currently sexually abstinent reported that he is recovering from the grief of the death of his lover of twenty-eight years.

This approval and respect for long-term relationships is confirmed by the fact that all but three of the male respondents endorsed the idea of a same-sex unions in which the partners maintain a monogamous relationship, with some approval from civil and religious authorities. One male stated:

I wish there were more of them. I know couples who have been together thirty-two, seventeen, and twenty-five years. They should be examples...[but] these men don't step out of the closet and make themselves visible. Hence, a lot of younger gays don't have an example...they think that everyone is into instant sex and a lasting relationship isn't possible.““

Many expressed the hope that these unions could be sanctioned, if not supported and blessed by the Church. Although the comparison was made with heterosexual marriages, some respondents cautioned against

““ Tape Male #17, transcript, 144.

patterning gay and lesbian unions after heterosexual marriages because of the amount and the severity of marital discord as well as the high rate of marital failure in the straight community. One of the male respondents stated this view of gay and lesbian unions and relationships:

I want a monogamous relationship...If you love someone and are honest, [sex] is not a sin...I think if gays and lesbians were accepted...maybe they would stay in committed relationships because they wouldn't have to covertly go and find love in all those sexual acts.⁴³

Even those who condone sex outside of long-term relationships seem to favour a committed relationship or same-sex union as the ideal situation. One male said that sex outside a union is "inevitable." He stated that it was not always harmful, and that it was his opinion that sexual activity is often beneficial to the people involved because it "...opens doors, windows and is an introduction to feelings and ideas you wouldn't have otherwise."⁴⁴ This male says:

I want, when I go to bed with a man, to go to bed with that man because I take delight in who he is, and he in me. Sex out of a relationship can be perfectly moral and an exercise of my freedom and stewardship of my

⁴³ Tape Male #1, interview, 13.

⁴⁴ Tape Male #6, transcript, 83.

resources as a lover. God put us here to love each other and if the Church wastes all its breath on why we shouldn't love most of the people, then the problems with promiscuity [arise because] we don't know how to love.⁴⁷

A union between two people of the same sex is quite as capable of...enhancing the work of divine grace and the Holy Spirit in the lives of those people, and of their community and of the world and the Church at large...the Church should bless those unions and provide to those people the same support it provides heterosexual couples.⁴⁸

In describing his sexual ethic, one male outlined what he felt would be the structure of his vision of a good relationship. He said:

Responsible, ethical sexual behaviour means that you operate out of a basis of love. That you operate in relationship, as married couples, based on love, not based on using one another, but based on true care for one another. [Sex becomes] an expression of each others' humanness and support for each other....I accept the fact that the concept of a long-term relationship probably has a different meaning for a gay person than for a straight person...but the relationship needs to derive from a commitment, a love for one another.⁴⁹

Three respondents, two male and one female, voiced disapproval for the idea of sacramental blessings or ceremonies that would celebrate the vows of two people

⁴⁷ Tape Male #6, transcript, 83-84.

⁴⁸ Tape Male #6, transcript, 82.

⁴⁹ Tape Male #8, transcript, 99.

hoping to establish a committed, permanent, monogamous relationship. A male respondent said:

I do not approve of gay and lesbian unions because they mirror heterosexual society and this community can do...better...I've found unions to be just like weddings.¹⁰

A female respondent stated:

I think it's mimicking the straight community ...I think we [gays and lesbians] need to find something totally different, something for us, not for them. I think [commitments] are beautiful.¹¹

However, the desire, on the part of many respondents, to have a stable, permanent and monogamous sexual relationship contrasts sharply with the role genital sexual activity plays in the world of some gay males. One respondent who is now in a monogamous relationship describes what many gay males face:

If there is anything that bothers me about the gay life it's the sex. In the heterosexual world, you date somebody, you get to know somebody, and then sex comes down the road. In the gay world, you meet someone, have sex with them, and only then do you get to know them....you have to prove yourself, that somebody loves you and that you can be loved because society, as a rule, doesn't love you because you are gay or lesbian. For a lot of people, it's a game of conquest....They don't care. Sure you get

¹⁰ Tape Male #14, transcript, 63-64.

¹¹ Tape Female #2, transcript, 185-186.

hurt. It's constant. You constantly get hurt. Then you turn to your Church for solace and comfort and some idiot in Rome shoots his mouth off and hurts you again.³²

Another male explains:

If you're [single, you're] out in the meat market, it's not a loving and caring type of thing. As a couple, you're loving and caring for each other.³³

One of the chaplains presented his view of the so-called meat market attitude among gay males as follows:

Poor gay men...[They] are programmed to see the young and the beautiful as desirable... Once you have the young and beautiful, you notice there is something else young and more beautiful. So you cast off that one. And when that conquest is made, on to another. That is the curse of the homosexual male.³⁴

One female respondent feels that the Church, and consequently, society's sanctions against stable, long term gay and lesbian relationships only reinforce the very promiscuity that the Ratzinger Letter seems to see as a part of gay and lesbian social life. This woman says:

Relationships should show concern. Not using or abusing or allowing themselves to just take pleasure from the other person without any care as to that person's feelings... there is a genuine interest, concern and a

³² Tape Male #9, transcript, 116-117.

³³ Tape Male 19, transcript, 156.

³⁴ Transcript, 254.

feeling of tenderness towards that person...A relationship should be thought out, and not just glandular....[but] so many people have had to sneak around to receive any type of homosexual experience that is what they equate pleasure and eroticism with. So you have a lot of men who frequent rest stops, bars, bathhouses and stuff. I personally don't like that. I could never indulge in such sexual escapades.²⁸

The Chaplains' View of Sexual Ethics.

Those who minister to the Dignity community must, themselves, struggle with the issue of sexual ethics in their own lives as well as in their professional work. During the course of the interview portion of the research project, three of the chaplains came out, revealing that they, themselves are gay men. Consequently, their responses become even more relevant to this research project because the theology presented in this section is, most likely, based on the combination of these priests' scholarship coupled with their life experiences. Their views become relevant to Dignity because of their pastoral relationships with the various chapters they are associated with. (Some chaplains have worked with chapters other than those involved in this research project.)

These chaplains' decisions to come out to the

²⁸ Tape Female #1, transcript, 169.

interviewer illustrate the profound gift of self and trust in others that is an integral part of the coming out process and also of many members' Dignity experience, as discussed earlier. In acting as role models for the community, these priests have taken great personal risks, but they persist in offering the ultimate gift of self and trust to the Dignity community -- and, to the author as a real part of that community. In one instance, the priest answered the first four questions directly, speaking of Dignity and the gay and lesbian community as "them." As the first fifteen minutes of the interview progressed, however, the level of intimacy and communication deepened. There was a perceptible shift in the priest's mood and the interviewer felt that he had dropped many psychological defenses, and there was a profound sense of trust. Then, in response to the sixth question,⁵⁶ the priest used first person pronouns, identifying himself from that moment on with the gay community as he replied that Dignity let him see other gay and lesbian Catholics practice their faith. In Dignity, he was able to know that "...we are not individuals,

⁵⁶ Chaplain question #6 reads: Describe what your spiritual life would be without Dignity.

rather we are a community...." Forty minutes later, he responded affirmatively to a direct question that he is, in fact, gay. In this manner, this priest revealed how Dignity's struggle in the area of sexual ethics is, in a very real way, his struggle as well.

Most of the chaplains endorsed the members' view of the morality of committed relationships. One stated:

Sex within a committed gay/lesbian relationship is as moral as sex for a married man and woman. The ideal is a monogamous, loving, faithful, relationship. Sex outside such a relationship is not the ideal, but its wrongness depends on circumstances. For example, a young person just coming out usually goes through a period of experimentation. This should be judged much more lightly than similar behaviour in an older person who should have some maturity. If sex is used for exploitation...this is especially wrong. But we need much leniency and forgiveness, all of us!⁵⁷

Another chaplain confirms the respondents' views. He explains that gay and lesbian people, at present, currently have no way of having their committed relationships recognized or receiving religious or societal sanctions -- no matter how permanent or loving these relationships are. One respondent came face to face with the pain the lack of supportive legal

⁵⁷ Correspondence with author, 11 July 1989.

sanctions can cause. He recalls:

I lived the twenty-eight best years of my life in a blessed union. I was angry when my lover died. I couldn't [even] see the cremation certificate, or the death certificate.²⁸

Integrating their sexual ethic, however committed and monogamous, into their life within the Church is difficult for many gay and lesbian Catholics. However, one of the chaplains explains how the chaplain and a number of this individual's gay and lesbian Catholic acquaintances have been able to survive within the Church. The chaplain says:

Never go to a stranger for confession, because you do not know what you are walking into. Priests I know who have served as confessors, when discussing how to deal with certain issues, do not tell people to break off relationships. Even the gay clergy, the times they have gone to confession, the confessors they went to had no problem whatsoever with them being in relationships as long as it was healthy and as long as they were at ease between themselves and God, as individuals as well as couples.²⁹

²⁸ Tape Male #16, transcript, 140.

²⁹ Transcript, 264.

Summary.

Briefly, then, it can be stated that the individual Dignity members who were participants in this research project have quietly and privately developed a lived sexual ethic that is mirrored in the sexual ethic as articulated in the Dignity/USA Sexual Ethics Task Force Report accepted at the 1989 San Francisco HOD. According to this ethic, a loving, committed relationship is the ideal. The respondents agree that gay and lesbian people can and must choose to exercise their physical sexuality responsibly, with love, consideration, and mutual respect.

The fact that Dignity members share not only in theory, but also, to a high degree, in practice, a fundamentally common sexual ethic is a major factor in their cohesiveness and solidarity, and in the durability of the organization to which they belong. When Dignity as an organization articulated its sexual ethic in its ongoing debate with the Church hierarchy, its statements were in harmony with the thinking of the research project's respondents.

Section IV.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSIONS

This project asks how Dignity the organization survives in the face of intimidation and opposition from the very institution it turns to for acceptance and affirmation. Questioning how Dignity attracts and holds members, the study seeks the sources of strength that enable Dignity to flourish, and to celebrate joyfully the lives of its gay and lesbian members.

The literature review first establishes -- and the interviews with Dignity members confirm -- that many gay and lesbian Catholics face serious problems in the

milieu of the heterosexual parish. The literature chronicles a history of discrimination and unjust treatment. This is echoed in Dignity's oral tradition and documented from interviews and participant observation notes. Members tell of cruel treatment when seeking sacramental reconciliation or counselling. In the parish milieu, fear of ostracism and other sanctions inhibit interpersonal relations. Many gay and lesbian people can risk coming out only to those whom they trust intimately: carefully chosen close friends and, perhaps, a sympathetic priest. Consequently, gay and lesbian people remain a hidden minority, concealing the most meaningful aspects of their lives from acquaintances in their parish. This situation perpetuates the mistrust and misunderstanding that lead to further injustice.

The Literature Review.

The literature review supports the conclusion that sufficient grounds exist to reinforce many gay and lesbian people's feelings of isolation and rejection, despite the largely undocumented but courageous work of many compassionate and caring priests and pastoral ministers. The literature provides sufficient evidence to lead to the conclusion that Dignity counteracts

negative experiences, enabling some of its members to return to the Church after decades-long absences. In part, Dignity accomplishes this by serving as an alternative to family-oriented, straight parishes. Dignity also provides networks and support structures that parallel those parishes. The literature review also repeatedly demonstrates how Dignity provides its members with support and acceptance, especially during the coming out process.

Interview Data.

The results of the open-ended interviews and participant observation, as discussed in Chapters IV through VII, validate the findings of the literature review. More importantly, the interviews provide new information and additional insights that show how Dignity meets the needs of the gay and lesbian Catholic community.

Many respondents report how they find, in Dignity, the very acceptance they fail to find in other experiences within the Church. The open-ended interviews with members also show how Dignity members bond into a faith community composed of those who share in the gay and lesbian culture. Dignity's regularly scheduled Masses can be seen as a liturgical expression

of this gay culture. Respondents underscore the importance of social activities, telling how participation leads to the establishment or the maintenance of committed relationships. By annually performing a ritual blessing of couples, Dignity emphasizes the value and respect it has for those relationships. Thus, the interview data supports the conclusion that Dignity helps its members to integrate their spirituality and their sexuality on a very practical and concrete level.

Some participants cite specific examples of positive changes in their lives that they attribute to involvement with Dignity. These include weight loss, and a marked improvement in the ability to interact with and relate to parents or siblings and to other Dignity members. Some study participants view election to office in Dignity as a measure of personal growth.

Some respondents -- consciously or unconsciously -- use Dignity to help heal the scars of trauma and pain inflicted by abusive or alcoholic parents. Their comments on Dignity's role in alleviating their pain point to the conclusion that, for some, Dignity serves as a substitute for the dysfunctional family life that dominated their childhood experiences.

This interview data discussed in Chapters IV and V supports the conclusion that Dignity meets many of its members' important needs. Respondents report that Dignity membership facilitates the self-acceptance that plays an important part in the coming out process. They tell how Dignity provides support, and discuss how they respond to the opportunities Dignity presents for spiritual and psychological growth. Dignity, they report, meets social needs by providing members with a common ground to build friendships within the context of a close-knit community that some participants regard as parish or family. Observations and interviews demonstrate that respondents treasure their chapters' liturgical celebrations. Thus, the interview data supports the conclusion that Dignity attracts and holds its members by meeting their psychological and spiritual needs in a group that is self-identified as gay, lesbian, and Catholic.

Chaplain Interviews.

The interviews with six chaplains and a regional bishop reveal a belief that many aspects of the Dignity experience benefit its members. They praise the intense spirituality of the group, especially as displayed during the Sunday Masses. The chaplains

state that the non-religious social activities counteract the extreme loneliness and social isolation that plague many in the community, pushing some to alcoholism and threats of suicide. This data leads to the conclusion that the chaplain respondents (priests, nuns, and members of religious orders) endorse and support Dignity after noting its many positive effects on its members.

The interviews with the chaplain were used to verify the accuracy of the members' interviews. However, other data about the chaplains' roles and motives surfaced. Some chaplains expressed fear of losing their jobs and ending their careers if their ministry to Dignity became public. Their other duties might suffer because they could be identified as gay or lesbian -- even if they are straight. And, as it turned out, half of the chaplains are gay. These circumstances lead to the conclusion that the chaplains have serious reasons for continued involvement.

In fact, some view their ministry as fulfilment of an obligation to serve an oppressed minority. Others agree to celebrate Mass for Dignity as a personal favour to a friend. However, in fulfilling their promise, the chaplains undergo extraordinary spiritual

experiences that compel them to continue to serve Dignity. Some speak of a profound sense of the presence of the Spirit of God acting in the Dignity community. Others state that they are moved by the intense spirituality expressed at the Masses. All of the chaplains report that, in a very special way, they feel nurtured, affirmed and served by this community they have come to serve. The gay chaplains reported that they felt personally strengthened and sustained in their ministry by contact with Dignity. These facts lead to two conclusions. First, the chaplains have observed sufficient benefits to Dignity members to warrant their involvement, even when some personal risk is involved. Secondly, personal benefits to the chaplains encourage their involvement.

Sexual Ethics

The findings of this research project underscore the difficulty Dignity faces in its attempts to resolve its differences with the Church hierarchy in the realm of sexual ethics. The two documents approved by the San Francisco HOD, the amendment to the Statement of Position and Purpose and the report of the Task Force on Sexual Ethics, could serve as a basis for discussion between Dignity and the Church. Both documents are

forthright attempts to address, with honesty and integrity, the issue of sexual ethics as it applies to the gay and lesbian community. In these documents, Dignity calls on the Church to reevaluate honestly its position in the light of recent scholarship and the evidence the Task Force on Sexual Ethics presents about the lived experience of gay men and lesbian women.

Dignity's stand on sexual ethics is an area where the differences between chapter leadership sometimes occur -- more specifically between the Detroit leadership and some members of the national executive board. While most members returned from the convention enthused, the local president, in conversation, expressed anger, dismay and concern because he felt that undue emphasis was placed on evicted chapters, instead of those struggling to remain on Church property. Also, to deflect the possibility of any conflict with Detroit's ordinary, the Detroit president, at the chapter's general membership meetings and in the chapter newsletter, stressed that Dignity Detroit voted against the position and purpose amendment. Thus it is possible to conclude that, regardless of personal belief, some Dignity leaders will only take a stand which they feel will avoid

confrontation and eviction that might divide their chapter.

These recent statements and documents on sexual ethics satisfy yet another of its members' needs: to publicly state their belief that it is moral for gay and lesbian people to express physically their love. Also, Dignity members have seen evicted chapters survive, and continue to grow. Consequently, some members have lost their fear of Church discipline. They see Dignity / USA's stand as refreshing, honest, and in tune with the reality of their situation as gay and lesbian men and women.

Dignity's Outlook for the Future.

There is little doubt that Dignity meets many of its members' needs. The involvement of many concerned priests, vowed male and female members of religious orders, and even some members of the hierarchy at once prove and increase Dignity's effectiveness. However, when Dignity chapters clearly state their views on sexual ethics, they find themselves in conflict with Church teachings as stated in the Ratzinger Letter. The chapters then become subject to eviction from Church property.

If Dignity does not resolve its differences with

the Church in the area of sexual ethics, it may not be able to continue to define itself as a "Catholic" group. Because its Catholic identity is an integral part of Dignity's character, Dignity's future may be in doubt. Certainly, the structural organization, with its office equipment, mailing and membership lists, national and local officers and chapters could carry on. Whether or not this group could be, by definition, a Catholic group remains to be seen.

However, Dignity may find that it is not forced to take this option. In the wake of the Ratzinger Letter, many dioceses have formed ministries to the gay and lesbian community. However, all of these ministries are based on the views expressed in the Ratzinger Letter. For the gay and lesbian Catholic who believes in his / her inherent goodness, these ministries may not be honest options. True, they may offer Masses on Church property, and under diocesan auspices. However, the gay or lesbian person who participates in such a program, in essence, affirms the correctness of the Ratzinger Letter and its view of gay and lesbian people.

Dignity has, however, proven very valuable, not only to its members, but to its ministers -- especially

the gay and lesbian priests and members of religious orders. This effectiveness is documented in Bordisso's recent study on moral development of priests, and in Gramick's study on gay and lesbian religious. In view of recent estimates that the number of gay priests has grown to numbers ranging from fifty to seventy percent of the ordained priesthood¹, Dignity may have allies willing to argue on its behalf.

In fact, mandatory celibacy in the all-male world of the Catholic priesthood presents a viable option for the young gay male. Through seminary training, he acquires respectability and status, the chance to help others and do good, possibly an intellectual and stimulating life, and, most of all, no expectations or pressure to engage in a heterosexual relationship.

Ironically, this alternative for the gay male is rejected by McNaught in On Being Gay and in his videotape. In both sources, McNaught looks upon the seminary and the priesthood as a poor option both for the individual, and for those in the community to whom this person may be called on to minister.

¹ Jason Berry, "Homosexuality in Priesthood Said to Run High," National Catholic Reporter, 27 February 1987, 1, 16-20; James G. Wolf, ed. Gay Priests, Harper and Row, 1989. 49.

Priests, brothers, and women members of religious orders -- gay and straight -- have been active in Dignity from its birth. A priest founded Dignity. Priests have served as officers, advisors, chaplains, spiritual directors, legal advisors, and in a very real way, function as technical advisors. However, Dignity / USA past president Jim Bussen has stated, on more than one occasion: "One of our biggest problems is gay priests. They come into our community and cruise. They go back to their rectories and act more homophobic than straight priests."²

In the publication The Advocate, De Stefano challenges the Church's stand on gay clergy -- while it oppresses gays and lesbians. Commenting on Nugent's statement that bishops are supportive of gay priests, even when arrested on morals charges, De Stefano states:

What Nugent sees as compassion, however, others might regard as evidence of the Church's hypocrisy. Isn't this a case of "do as I say, not as I do?" How dare the Church condemn homosexuality and obstruct gay/lesbian civil rights struggles while tolerating the sexual shenanigans of its male

² James Bussen, personal communication, May 1989.

clergy?³

In view of this reality of a gay clergy, Dignity may have a good chance of resolving its dispute with the Church because these priests and religious will, eventually, have to come to terms with the conflict between Church teaching and their own personal belief that the physical expressions of love between gay and lesbian people are, in fact, moral. Dignity's efforts at articulating a sexual ethic for the gay and lesbian community may be important to a church that prizes a celibate, all-male clergy. Recent research has now confirmed that the populations of seminaries, monasteries, and rectories are composed of growing numbers of gay men who have been ordained or have taken perpetual vows.⁴ The questions remain unanswered as to how these hidden members of an oppressed minority can counsel honestly members of the dominant culture in matters of marital life, child-rearing, and related life situations. However, it can be hoped that Dignity's insistence on an honest reevaluation of the

³ George De Stefano, "Gay Under the Collar: The Hypocrisy of the Catholic Church," in The Advocate, 4 February 1986, 44.

⁴ Berry, "Homosexuality in Priesthood," 1, 16-20; Wolf, Gay Priests, 49.

Church's position on sexual ethics will give this gay clergy and the Church both the motive and the opportunity to undertake this task that would help all Catholic Christians, gay and straight.

Future Research Possibilities.

If anything, this study shows the need for further research involving Dignity. Basic survey research of the 4700 members of Dignity must be conducted, and in fact, discussions are in progress to assure that this work is done. Demographic research would reveal demographic information on income, age, sex, occupation, etc. Related research could involve Dignity members' perception of Church teaching; and how members are able to resolve their conflicts with the Church. A major project that could only be undertaken when this research has been concluded, involves asking why Dignity members remain in a Church that represses gay and lesbian people, viewing their physical expressions of love for one another as immoral and evil.

Other research might involve the role of women in Dignity. Major work also needs to be done to discover the relationship between seminary and convent experience and Dignity membership -- and Dignity

leadership. Research should also ask if Dignity fosters and encourages committed relationships.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

This research project questioned how and why Dignity has persisted in spite of a hostile and repressive attitude on the part of the Church hierarchy. The study utilized a methodology that combined two qualitative research techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews. The projects's goal was to examine the hypothesis that Dignity has endured because it provides its members with the experience of empowering acceptance, support, protection, fellowship and intimacy that they have been

unable to find elsewhere.

Rationale.

Bogdan and Taylor define qualitative research as "...research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour."¹ Bogdan and Taylor argue in favour of using qualitative research on the grounds that this technique permits otherwise unknown people to give voice, in their own words, to their life stories and experiences thus enabling empathy with the subjects to develop as others begin to perceive the world from the studied group's point of view.²

According to Schwartz and Jacob,³ coupling the two qualitative research techniques of participant observation and interviewing helps the researcher arrive at a more accurate view of a subject population by focusing on differences between professed beliefs and actual life decisions that reflect an individual's

¹ Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984), 4.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacobs, Qualitative Sociology: A Method to the Madness (New York: Free Press, 1979), 46.

true ethical standards.⁴ In short, Schwartz and Jacob state that combining techniques "...offers a potentially powerful way to call into question the relationship between words and deeds."⁵

The social science technique of participant observation demands that the researcher become intensely involved in the social interactions and the lives of the study group's members and participants. In this way, the researcher becomes aware of the group's concerns, history, dynamics, and power structure. Members' interpersonal relationships, as well as the study group's relationship to the dominant culture became evident as the researcher shared in the individual members' common, everyday experiences. Observing and taking part in activities, struggles, social events, and funerals over an extended period of time provided an understanding of the subjects' world view. This type of close-quarter observation yields rich data that provides an intimate view of those under study.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bogdan and Taylor, Qualitative Research Method, 5,9.

This project also utilized in-depth, loosely structured interviews in an attempt to probe the relationships between individual Dignity members, between members and their local chapters, and the members' perceptions of and experiences as Catholic gays or lesbians prior to and since joining Dignity. Use of this type of interview technique revealed how the members and chaplains felt that their association with Dignity provided previously ignored and unmet needs that involvement with other situations, including local parishes, did not satisfy.

Interview Questions.

A list of twenty-one questions formed the basis of a skeletal structure for the personal interviews. Questions 1 through 5 elicited baseline information on the members' reasons for joining and remaining with Dignity, the length of time they stayed with the group, and the intensity and duration of an individual's involvement. Because individuals tend to allot the scarce resources of time and energy to those projects or causes that produce the greatest satisfaction or benefit in their personal lives, involvement may reflect Dignity's value to its members.

As the interviews progressed, it became evident

that these first fact-finding questions evoked, in some subjects, a flood of painful memories and experiences related to their struggles to come to terms with their sexual orientation and to resolve the conflicts sexual orientation presented vis-a-vis their Catholicity. In one instance a ninety-minute, uninterrupted interview ensued after the third question prompted the subject to recount an entire life history.

Questions 6 through 10, 18, and 19, attempted to determine if membership or participation in a Dignity chapter's activities resulted in any changes in an individual's spiritual life or self-image.

The eleventh and twelfth questions helped elicit any negative reactions to the Dignity experience the subject may have avoided discussing earlier.

Questions 13 through 15 dealt with the subjects' sexual ethics. These questions constitute a critical part of this study because members of the hierarchy cite the issue of sexual ethics as justification for adverse action against Dignity. Correspondence and interviews show that U.S. bishops ousted from Church property those chapters that refused either to confirm members' belief in particular official Church statements on sexual ethics, or to denounce the

statement on sexual ethics adopted by the Dignity national House of Delegates in Florida in July 1987.

Question 17 provides demographic information about the subject population. This question, like the questions on sexual ethics, occurred at a point in the interview when the rapport that had been firmly established between subject and researcher could yield frank and honest answers. Also, while questions 15 and 16 might have presented an individual's view of an ideal or theoretical sexual ethic, question 17 disclosed any inconsistencies in a participant's answers because question seventeen attended to the reality of the ethical life choices made by an individual over time.

Question 14 attempted to uncover the individual's understanding of the institutional Church's teaching on homosexuality by dealing with the moral conflict between the sexual ethic a subject arrived at through lived experience and the ideal sexual ethic presented by the Church.

The sixteenth question was originally designed to uncover Dignity members' perceptions of an attitude of discrimination or of judgementalism against gay and lesbian Catholics. Discussions with Dignity members

that took place before the research project began prompted this question's inclusion in the study. This question's importance paled, however, as some participants spontaneously raised two other issues: their experiences as victims of child abuse, either physical or psychological; and alcohol abuse, either by the subjects or their families.

The prepared interview questions formed the backbone of the actual interviews and served as a useful tool in the interview process. It soon became apparent that some individuals who seemed hesitant to participate in the study consented to an interview because they had some assurance about the situation they were getting into. Using this prepared list encouraged participation because ambivalent individuals could ask Dignity officers about the project and the questions they would have to answer. In fact, in the end, the researcher was unable to interview all of the subjects wishing to participate, because of time restraints.

Personal Documents.

As the project progressed, other materials served as sources of information, including personal correspondence and other autobiographical materials that were

either distributed to officers or published in various chapter newsletters. Bogdan and Taylor describe this source material, and the transcripts of the long, open ended interviews, as personal documents.⁷ They define this term as "...those materials in which people reveal in their own words their view of their entire life, or a part of it, or some other aspect about themselves."⁸ The value of personal documents, according to Bogdan and Taylor, lies in the fact that these documents reveal facets of subjects' lives not otherwise accessible to the researcher, providing a "...view [of] a person in relation to the history of his or her time and [allowing the researcher] to examine....the intersection between the lives of people and...their societies."⁹

Ethical Issues.

Before the actual interviewing began, thesis director Dr. George Crowell received oral, and later, written approval of the methodology from Dr. John Lewis, Chair of the University of Windsor Ethics Committee. In addition, Dr. Barry Adam of the

⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

Sociology Department, who acted as outside reader on the project, periodically reviewed the research methodology, including the question format as well as all interview procedures and methodology, in addition to providing guidance for field work procedures while that portion of the project progressed.

Contact with Dignity/Detroit began in early February, 1989 when the researcher attended a regularly scheduled Sunday evening Mass and the subsequent social gathering. Officers and long-time members initiated conversations and quickly accepted the researcher as part of the group. Acceptance and rapport were facilitated at this critical stage of building relationships because of the researcher's prior acquaintance with and knowledge of the activities of one of the other Dignity chapters in the study. This prior association provided the researcher with a working knowledge of Dignity history in the year preceding and following the release of the Ratzinger Letter. As the research progressed, this prior involvement worked both to the researcher's advantage and disadvantage. Seeing the hurt and alienation that the Ratzinger Letter precipitated, after witnessing Dignity's positive impact on individuals' lives over a

four-year period, spawned this research project. This long-standing relationship, with its negative and positive aspects, provided information and insights that would have been impossible to acquire in the relatively short period of time normally allowed for this type of research project. However, the intense involvement that occurs in such long-range relationships places serious demands on the researcher's emotional resources as the researcher not only observes and records data needed to prove or disprove a hypothesis. But, almost in a pastoral sense, the researcher journeys with those who become part of the researcher's life as treasured friends and acquaintances, not just information sources or statistics.

Report with Study Population.

From the beginning, the Dignity/Detroit president and members of the Executive Council -- the elected officers -- were helpful and receptive to the project. After reading an early draft of the proposal, they gave oral permission for the interviews and other research with the chapter and its members to commence. Proceeding in this fashion assured the community of the legitimacy of the research goals, thus alleviating

suspicion or ethical problems that a covert research project with disguised goals might engender.

Relating to the officers with candour and openness about the goals of the research project resulted in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation that transferred to many of the members. Without the officers' assistance, few people would have consented to interviews, or tolerated the ongoing presence of a researcher in intimate discussions for months on end. Officers' cooperation included an offer to help find volunteers by word of mouth, if necessary. The researcher was allowed to use a small chapel in the community centre on Porter Street for interviewing purposes. In addition, as interviews often took place one or two hours before Mass actually began, one of two officers either took pains to arrive at the site earlier than they planned otherwise, or they adjusted their schedules to accommodate the interviews or requests for information and data.

In order to provide additional protection to the Dignity members -- and to increase the probability of rapport with the members -- the list of questions originally approved by the directing committee and subsequently, the departmental graduate committee, was

submitted to the Dignity Executive Council for discussion and possible approval. The Dignity/Detroit president allowed the researcher to present a brief summary of the project at a regularly scheduled council meeting which was held in the Dignity offices on 16 April 1989, following the weekly Mass. All elected officers attended this meeting, as well as three members who wished either to ask the council to consider specific issues for discussion, or to participate in the discussion of pertinent agenda items. In a closed meeting that was held following this presentation, the officers discussed the project. The researcher was given verbal notification of the project's approval and was subsequently permitted access to the general membership.

Finding Subjects.

In order to solicit volunteers for the project, the researcher was allowed to speak at an open meeting attended by approximately twenty-five members. At this meeting, more than a dozen individuals indicated interest in the project by signing their names and phone numbers to a list. Following this initial appeal for volunteers, a notice explaining the project and including the researcher's home address and telephone number,

was printed in Dignity/Detroit's weekly newsletter. In addition, two announcements were placed in the monthly newsletter that all members, chaplains, and non-members on the group's mailing list receive. These ads yielded only a disappointing response, probably because they would have involved a long distance phone call at the subject's expense.

Contact with the Ann Arbor chapter was far less formal, because of prior interaction with the chapter and long-standing existing friendships.

Volunteers were chosen to reflect age and gender divisions as well as involvement level in the chapters. Thus, not all of the volunteers were included in the study. Women were especially sought as subjects after a conflict that arose concerning sexism and the role of women in the Detroit chapter.

When information from newsletters and subjects indicated a discrepancy in facts, another interview was done by submitting the list of questions to a respondent who replied in writing after telephone discussions clarified all questions. Another interview with a former Dignity celebrant, now a diocesan official in charge of gay and lesbian ministry, took place over the phone. In this interview, the question list was not

utilized.

When the researcher attended the regional House of Delegates meetings hosted by Ann Arbor chapter, national and regional officers provided additional cooperation by allowing the researcher to audio-tape a number of discussions as well as a session devoted to the oral history of the region.

Confidentiality.

Throughout the course of this research, the subject population's right to privacy and confidentiality were of primary concern to the researcher and the directing committee.

Because of the potential for harm that might result from inadvertent exposure of identity, all those associated with Dignity consider confidentiality to be an area of serious concern. Thus, although officers at the chapter, regional and national level provided invaluable assistance while the work was in progress, they maintained the confidentiality of their members at all times. In short, at no time in the course of the project did any officer violate the organization's strict code of confidentiality that protects its membership or celebrant lists and other confidential data.

Although a small percentage of Dignity members

live openly gay lives, making no attempt to conceal their sexual orientation from family, friends, and work associates encountered in the course of daily living, most of the gay and lesbian individuals associated with the group do not enjoy this freedom. In fact, in most instances, as the interviews show, members' friends, relatives and families may not be aware of the reality of Dignity members' true sexual orientation. In other instances, Dignity members hold sensitive positions of responsibility within the structure of the Church, the medical or academic communities, or private industry that would be compromised if these individuals' identity and sexual orientation became common knowledge in the community at large. Because of this ever-present tension, and because of the numerous experiences of betrayal, bigotry, harassment and discrimination that many gay and lesbian people have experienced, stressing confidentiality not only allowed Dignity members to fully participate in the interviews, but facilitated the entire research project.

Dignity members have good cause for concern regarding confidentiality. The vice-president of a Louisville (Kentucky) bank lost his job when his employers learned that he also held the office of president of

the Dignity-Integrity/Louisville chapter.¹⁰ Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Dignity/Detroit's first president, Brian McNaught, first lost his column and then his job with the Archdiocese of Detroit weekly newspaper, The Michigan Catholic.

A number of measures were taken to try to insure subjects' confidentiality. Instead of signed consent forms which might have presented a security problem, members were presented with letters, which they read before each interview commenced. During the taping of interviews, the researcher avoided using the subjects' names. During the transcription process, any names the subjects might have used were omitted. The tapes were numbered. When the initial transcription was completed, all tapes were placed in a bank safe deposit box.

In an attempt to provide a further element of security for the subjects, members from the Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Toledo chapters were interviewed. Thus, subjects' identity is protected because the population of these chapters is drawn from several cities in Michigan and Ohio, from as far north as Lansing, to the

¹⁰Field Notes, Dignity / Region V House of Delegates, 31 July 1989.

southeastern Michigan metropolitan area that encompasses Detroit, its suburbs and northern Ohio. Members also attend these meetings from the nearby Canadian city of Windsor, Ontario.

Because chaplains who were interviewed for this project are scattered throughout the dioceses in Michigan, Ohio, and Ontario, their identities are protected. With two exceptions, they were interviewed in their rectories. The questions were modified slightly to accommodate chaplains' experiences and perceptions. A complete list of the chaplains' questions is included at the end of the chapter. Interviews were conducted in a number of settings. Every attempt was made to conduct interviews in a setting chosen by the subjects, where they would feel secure, at home, relaxed, and at ease.

At Dignity/Detroit, as stated earlier, the interviews were conducted in a small chapel in the community centre adjacent to the area where the members meet for the after Mass social gathering. This chapel afforded privacy. An "Interview in Progress" sign posted on one of the two doors, was, for the most part, respected, especially once an interview routine was established and the general membership accepted the interviewing

process as part of the chapter's regular routine.

Two interviews of Dignity/Detroit members took place at the members' shared home outside of the city of Detroit. Two other interviews of Dignity/Detroit members took place during the course of the chapter's annual retreat which was held in a retreat house located in a developing area some distance from Detroit. Other interview sites in Detroit included a coffee shop and an office at the chancery in downtown Detroit.

Dignity/Ann Arbor's facilities are somewhat limited because of the chapter's small size of the chapter and because of the current strained relationship with the pastor of the host parish. Its only office space is a small, poorly ventilated room that once served as a confessional. This office, located in the basement-like lower chapel of St. Mary's Student Chapel on the central campus of the University of Michigan, was unsuitable for use as an interview site. Thus, interviews with Dignity/Ann Arbor members occurred at the home of a trusted individual who respected the confidentiality of the members. Other Ann Arbor interviews took place at a member's one-person office, and at the University of Michigan Office of Gay and Lesbian

Affairs, located in the Michigan Student Union. In three instances, two with Dignity chaplains, and another with a Dignity/Detroit member, taped interviews were conducted at the researcher's Windsor home.

In retrospect, the most fruitful interviews occurred in Dignity/Detroit's chapel, the researcher's home and the rectories. Distractions such as occasional interruptions and the background noise of more than 100 laughing and joking people socializing in the adjoining living room might have intruded on the interviews. On the contrary, the secure, totally relaxed atmosphere permeated even the interview setting and seemed to stimulate the subjects to talk freely and openly. The advantage of interviews in subjects' and researchers' homes was principally one of time: If a subject wished to address an area of concern, he or she could continue the discussion at much greater length than at Dignity because there were no concerns about missing Mass or the extended Eucharist of the social and subsequent dinner.

Respondents' desire to share their stories, meaningful involvement, and in one case, to share the anger and the pain of years of repression, overcame barriers of unfamiliarity. The individuals who visited the

researcher's home had never been there prior to the interviews.

On the other hand, intimacy, familiarity, and friendship intruded and blocked total candour with the Ann Arbor group. While Detroit members freely discussed painful experiences, the Ann Arbor members avoided volunteering such information. It is possible to speculate that a factor at work in this situation was a desire to maintain a friendship. Perhaps revealing hurtful material would have altered a prior relationship, and the volunteers choose not to take this risk and place themselves in a vulnerable position by extraordinary self-revelation.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS -- LAITY

- 1 - Why did you join Dignity?
- 2 - How long have you been a member?
- 3 - How active have you been in the organization?
- 4 - What were your expectations when you joined Dignity?
- 5 - How has Dignity met -- or not met -- your expectations?
- 6 - Describe what your spiritual life would be like without Dignity.
- 7 - Describe your experiences in the Church before joining Dignity.
- 8 - How is your life different as a Dignity member?
- 9 - What excites or pleases you most about Dignity?
- 10 - What memories do you treasure most from Dignity?
- 11 - What do you dislike most about Dignity?
- 12 - What things would you change about Dignity?
- 13 - What do you feel about the Ratzinger Letter?
- 14 - Please explain your perception of Church teaching on sexuality.
- 15 - Describe your idea of responsible, ethical sexual behaviour:
i.e. What about sex outside of a long-term relationship?
i.e. How do you feel about gay and lesbian unions?
- 16 - Describe your reaction to the Roman Church's ministry to AIDS victims.
- 17 - If you choose, can you describe your background:
i.e. job; relationship or marital status; in or out; celibate or sexually active; plans for the future, etc.
- 18 - How do you feel Dignity has helped you?
- 19 - In what ways have you benefited from Dignity?
- 20 - Describe your impressions of Dignity/National.
- 21 - Describe your impressions of the regional organization.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
CHAPLAINS

- 1 - Why did you begin celebrating Mass for Dignity? When did you become a chaplain?
- 2 - Are you a member? If so, how long have you been a member?
- 3 - How active have you been in the organization?
- 4 - What were your expectations when you began working with Dignity?
- 5 - How has Dignity met -- or not met -- your expectations?
- 6 - Describe what your spiritual life would be like without Dignity.
- 7 - Describe your experiences in the Church before joining Dignity.
- 8 - How has working with Dignity affected you?
- 9 - What pleases you most about Dignity?
- 10 - What memories do you treasure most from Dignity?
- 11 - What do you dislike most about Dignity?
- 12 - What things would you change about Dignity?
- 13 - What do you feel about the Ratzinger Letter?
- 14 - Please explain your perception of Church teaching on sexuality.
- 15 - Describe your idea of responsible, ethical sexual behaviour:
i.e. What about sex outside of a long-term relationship?
i.e. How do you feel about gay and lesbian unions?
- 16 - Describe your reaction to the Roman Church's ministry to AIDS victims.
- 17 - Can you state your present job outside of Dignity; do you plan to continue working with Dignity; your age; how long have you been in ministry and have you ministered to gays and lesbians outside of Dignity?
- 18 - How do you feel Dignity has helped you?
- 19 - In what ways does Dignity help its members?
- 20 - Describe your experiences and impressions of Dignity/National.
- 21 - Describe your experiences and impressions of the regional organization.

VITA AUCTORIS

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Education

- 1987 - 1990: Master of Arts, University of Windsor.
Department of Religious Studies.
Thesis Title: Dignity: the Organization.
- 1982 - 1984: Bachelor of Arts, University of Michigan.
Double Major: Anthropology and Psychology.
Honors Thesis: Origins of Religion.
- 1980 - 1982: Associate or Arts.
Wayne County Community College.
- 1962 - 1965: Courses at University of Windsor,
University of Detroit, and Wayne State
University Center for Adult Education.

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 7/86 - 8/87: Ann Arbor News.
Editor: City desk and Garden Page.
- 7/85 - 4/87: Pierian Press.
Assistant Editor, A Matter of Fact
Editorial Assistant, Media Review Digest.
- 9/83 - 8/84: Editor and Research Assistant:
International Student Pugwash
Collegiate Institute for Values.
- 5/83 - 8/83: Research Assistant:
Dr. Roberto Frisancho, Center for Human
Growth and Development. Developed
bibliography for a course on human sexual
differences. University of Michigan.
- 1967 - 1980: Free-lance writer with sales of several
hundred articles to local, regional and
national publications including 700 articles
for The Detroit News. Other work:
Freelance for The New York Times National and
Trend Desks and for the Detroit Bureau; articles
sold to Detroit Free Press Detroit Magazine,
American Youth, Detroit News Sunday Magazine,

Action Age, Family Circle, Woman's Day, Go Buick, Popular Mechanics, AAA Motor News / Michigan Living and other publications.

1977 - 1979: Instructor, Writing for Publication.
Wayne County Community College.

1977 - 1980: Writer-in-Residence.
Michigan Council for the Arts.

1976 - 1979: Speaker at the Craftsmanship in Creative Writing Conference. Sponsored by the Detroit Women Writers and Oakland University.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

1988 - 1989: Graduate Student Representative:
Department of Religious Studies.
Vice-President, External Affairs:
University of Windsor.
Graduate Student Society.

Fall 1989: Bursary, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

1987 - 1989: VISA Scholarship through Province of Ontario and the University of Windsor.

1987 - 1989: Full Graduate Assistantship.
Department of Religious Studies.

1988: Delegate to:
Canadian Theological Students' Conference
Atlantic School of Theology
Halifax, Nova Scotia.
Alternate delegate:
1989 national planning committee.

1987/1988; 1988/1989: Assumption University Award.

1988: Listed as researcher:
Canadian Research Institute for the
Advancement of Women.

Fall, 1982 - Spring 1984: University Grant (University of Michigan).