

Diocesan committee studies Vatican letter on homosexuality

To gays, letter reads more like an attack than pastoral care

By Teresa A. Parsons

For 28 years, Pat was part of a suburban congregation. During all those years, he never once heard a homily or even a word directed towards what he wryly termed as his "condition" — that of a man who is Catholic and homosexual.

Eventually, Pat decided to "give up the lie" and leave the safety of the suburban parish. But, thanks to Dignity/Integrity, he didn't give up on his church. Instead, he began attending services sponsored by a local chapter of the international organization that ministers to homosexual Catholics and Episcopalians.

Although he still prefers anonymity for his job's sake, Pat no longer hides part of himself from his fellow worshippers.

"I really found a home in the Church with

Dignity," he said. "They talked about who I was and made me feel as if I had some worth."

Benign neglect is a term that Pat and other gay and lesbian Catholics have often used critically to describe the diocesan attitude toward Dignity/Integrity.

Nowadays, since the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has offered bishops its views on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, Dignity members are wondering if continued neglect is the best they can hope for from their Church.

"I am hopeful that the letter will not have any impact on our relationship with the diocese," said Bill DeStevens, president of the local chapter of Dignity/Integrity. "I think the church would be doing a disservice to itself by attempting to draw away from Dignity. We are bringing people who've been hurt and alienated back into the Church... we're not drawing them away from traditional parishes."

Released October 30, the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" termed the homosexual condition "an objective disorder" and "a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil." It warned the bishops about propaganda spread by the "pro-homosexual movement" and prohibited the use of church facilities by groups that neglect, undermine or are ambiguous about Church teachings regarding homosexuality.

At the request of Bishop Matthew H. Clark, a diocesan committee has been formed to study the letter. Members of the committee include: Father William Graf, pastor at Annunciation Church; Father James Willsey, chaplain at Strong Memorial Hospital; Sister Cheryl Lee, Catholic chaplain for the local Dignity chapter; and

Monsignor William Shannon and William Sullivan, members of the diocesan theological commission. Heading the group are Father John Firpo, diocesan director of social ministry, and Sister Hilaire Gaelens, diocesan director of special pastoral ministries.

To date, they have met once and plan to gather once more before Christmas. Members have not yet defined a time line or specific aims, other than to determine whether the diocese is providing responsible pastoral services to its people and meeting the needs of the community.

"We have received the letter with respect and are seriously studying it," Father Firpo said. "We are asking how what we're doing now stacks up with what we should be doing and what may need to be done in the future."

"We are trying to see it in light of previous documents, rather than dealing with it in an isolated way," he added. "We want to be in union with Rome, and at the same time, deal with this in keeping with our local faith tradition."

Nearly a week after the Vatican letter was made public, a dozen members of Dignity also gathered to study it and discuss their reactions.

Afterward, they issued the following statement:

"Rather than a letter on pastoral care, we view this as a hypocritical statement filled with misinformation, contradictions and outright lies based on ignorance and fear. The obvious intent of this letter is to stifle dissent and to purge the Church of thousands of Catholic men and women who happen to be gay. As disturbing as we find this letter, we will not let it deter us from assuming our rightful place in the Catholic Church."

Because of other recent Vatican actions in the cases of Father Charles E. Curran and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, the letter didn't come as a surprise to most Dignity members.

"I expected it, but I didn't expect it to be as vile as it turned out to be," DeStevens said. "A truly pastoral letter comes from the people. They've not bothered to ask for the lived experience of gay people."

"This is the first pastoral letter I've read from beginning to end," Pat said. "But it's been my impression that most other letters

have been supportive, have encouraged growth. This letter is an attack."

In fact, DeStevens said, the letter "pretty much gives carte blanche" to those who commit violence against gay and lesbian persons by stating that while such acts are to be deplored, they are not surprising.

The letter also implies that gays are the source of AIDS, he added, when in reality homosexuals have fought almost singlehandedly for recognition, treatment and research on the disease.

"To claim that anyone is intrinsically disordered is making a judgment that only God can make," said one Dignity member and former religious, who asked to be identified only as Evelyn. "My strong objection and anger at that is that I do not consider myself — a human being created by God — as intrinsically not good."

"The acceptance I need comes from my relationship with God, not from my relationship with the institutional Church," Evelyn added. "If I don't receive that from the people who are supposed to be representatives of Christ, it doesn't disturb me. But that's a long journey — you don't begin there."

While the letter is hurtful to them, gay and lesbian Catholics like Evelyn, who accept themselves and have found acceptance within the Church, aren't likely to be personally affected by it.

"My fear is for the closeted gay who only hears a few key phrases, for what it's going to do to them... and for what it's going to do to families who have struggled to accept their children's orientation and are now thrown into a tailspin," Pat said. "If these people had thought of seeking support from the Church, they may be questioning whether they'll receive any."

Dignity members hope that the letter will prompt Catholics who have so far been unconcerned about the Church's attitude toward gays and lesbian to give some serious thought to them and their place in the Church.

They also hope that support groups like Dignity/Integrity will close ranks and support one another.

"The true sign of faith are those who stay and work from within the Church rather than abandoning it," DeStevens said. "I love my Church too much to just walk away."

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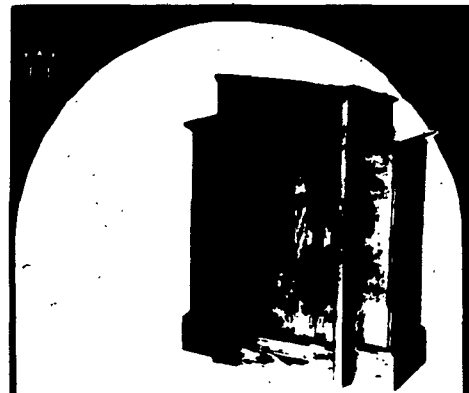
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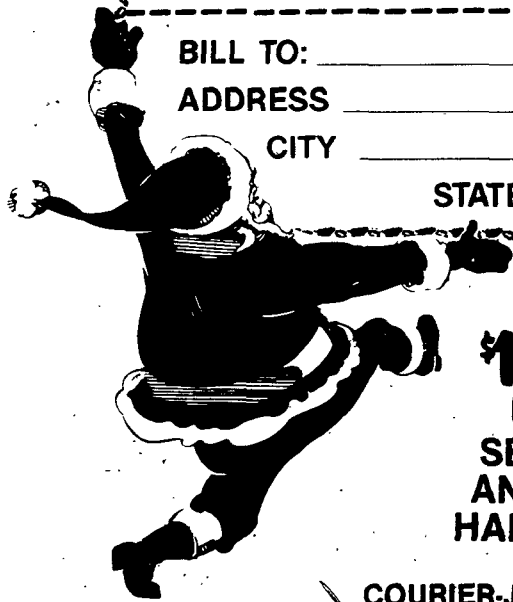
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