

Ministry to Homosexuals

Chicago Archdiocese Assumes Sponsorship of Mass

"In the future the archdiocese, rather than Dignity/Chicago, will be the sponsor" of the Sunday evening Mass at Chicago's St. Sebastian Parish, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin said in a statement May 15. Bernardin said that the archdiocese fully supports church teaching on human sexuality, "which rejects as immoral homosexual acts as distinguished from the person who is homosexual." He said the archdiocese "does not endorse any organization which assumes a position of advocacy against church teaching." At the same time he said "the archdiocese reaffirms its commitment to minister spiritually to its brothers and sisters who are homosexual" and is pursuing ways to do this more effectively. The Mass at St. Sebastian is attended by numerous gay and lesbian Catholics and others. Its sponsorship by Dignity/Chicago was never formally recognized by the archdiocese, Bernardin said. But the significance of the Mass at St. Sebastian goes beyond the question of sponsorship by Dignity/Chicago, Bernardin commented. "The Mass is an important part of the parish's ministry and is supported by the parish pastoral council. The Mass has become a point of return to the life of the church for many persons, whether homosexual or not, whether members of Dignity or not. It has met a pastoral need that exists at St. Sebastian and other parishes. To cancel the Mass would be a serious pastoral mistake." His statement follows.

For more than 17 years there has been a Sunday evening Mass at St. Sebastian Church that has served Catholics who are gay and lesbian. This Mass was begun by the parish itself as an outgrowth of the apostolate of the Legion of Mary among the members of the gay community. Subsequently, Dignity/Chicago assumed sponsorship for this Mass. Nonetheless, the Mass has always been considered by the pastor and parish council as an important part of the ministerial life of the parish. Moreover, as a regularly scheduled Mass, it has attracted some worshipers who are not members of the gay community.

Since its inception, the archdiocese has been aware of the Mass at St. Sebastian. The sponsorship/involvement of Dignity/Chicago has been monitored by the pastor of the parish. The archdiocese, however, never formally recognized the sponsorship of Dignity/Chicago because it saw an ambiguity in the position taken by Dignity with regard to church teaching on human sexuality. Its statement of purpose could be read either as being in conformity with church teaching or at variance with it. Last

(continued on page 51)

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE:

*Statement on the Evening Mass at St. Sebastian and Ministry to Homosexuals, by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, p. 49;

*On File, p. 50;

*Datebook, p. 50;

*Luthanasia: Ethical and Legal Challenge, by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, p. 52;

*Academic Freedom: The Church and the University, by Archbishop Daniel Maloney, p. 57;

*Phonologist to Continue Law Suit Against Catholic University, by Father Charles E. Curran, p. 51;

*A Historian's Message to Graduates at The Catholic University of America, by Msgr. John ... p. 62.

JUNE 9, 1988
VOL. 18, NO. 4

origins

documentary service

University Library
605-20-88
STAX

DIGNITY — continued from front page
August, however, that ambiguity was eliminated when Dignity/National adopted a resolution which called for an "openness to discussion on the morality of homosexual acts." The context of this resolution clearly indicates that its intent is to change some fundamental teachings of the church on human sexuality as reaffirmed recently by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its instruction "The Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons."

In the near future I will present, in a series of columns in the Chicago Catholic, the church's teaching on human sexuality and in that context I will indicate why the position of Dignity is unacceptable.

I am very concerned that gay and lesbian Catholics receive the pastoral care of their church. That pastoral care involves in one way or another elements of acknowledgment, support and direction. This new development, however, has required that the status of Dignity/Chicago's sponsorship of the Mass at St. Sebastian be reconsidered. It is my responsibility, as pastor of the church of Chicago, to make sure that the church's teaching on human sexuality is presented clearly and without any ambiguity. Moreover, it would be inappropriate to endorse an organization which officially advocates a position which is contrary to that of the church or to allow such an organization to assume a position of leadership in one of our parishes or agencies.

In order to resolve this dilemma in a way which will be doctrinally correct and pastorally sensitive, I have been meeting for over a year with the pastors of a number of parishes that have a significant number of gay and lesbian members. These pastors are already ministering in various ways to their gay and lesbian members. They are eager to develop this ministry, in collaboration with the archdiocese, in a way that will be both faithful to Catholic teaching and effective in their parishes.

The pastors and I have agreed on some basic principles upon which our ministry to the Catholic gay and lesbian community should be based:

1. The archdiocese strongly affirms the teaching of the church on the rights and dignity of all persons and the fact that these rights should be respected and protected.

2. The archdiocese condemns arbitrary discrimination and prejudice, violence and harassment against a person because of his or her sexual orientation.

3. The archdiocese fully supports the church's teaching on human sexuality, which rejects as immoral homosexual acts as distinguished from the person who is homosexual.

4. Accordingly, the archdiocese reaffirms its commitment to minister spiritually to its brothers and sisters who are homosexual. To that end, the archdiocese should pursue ways in which

it can do this more effectively.

5. The archdiocese does not endorse any organization which assumes a position of advocacy against church teaching.

In the context of these principles, I wish now to address the matter of the Sunday evening Mass at St. Sebastian. The importance and significance of this Mass go beyond the question of "sponsorship" by Dignity/Chicago. The Mass is an important part of the parish's ministry and is supported by the parish pastoral council. The Mass has become a point of return to the life of the church for many persons, whether homosexual or not, whether members of Dignity or not. It has met a pastoral need that exists at St. Sebastian and other parishes. To cancel the Mass would be a serious pastoral mistake.

For this reason, I have decided that the archdiocese will assume responsibility for this Mass and have asked the pastors of neighboring parishes to collaborate with the pastor of St. Sebastian in this responsibility. They will have direct responsibility for the Sunday evening liturgy, celebrating Mass on a regular basis. This understanding does not preclude, however, their inviting other priests to preside and preach on occasion.

"In order to resolve this dilemma in a way which will be doctrinally correct and pastorally sensitive, I have been meeting for over a year with the pastors of a number of parishes that have a significant number of gay and lesbian members."

In the future the archdiocese, rather than Dignity/Chicago, will be the sponsor of the Mass. All of those who have been participating in the Mass are invited to continue. All who have been involved in the planning and celebration of the Sunday eucharist are invited to continue sharing their experience and talent. It will be the responsibility of the pastors to ensure that everything connected with the Mass and any events which might take place before or after the liturgy be in accord with church teaching and discipline.

Father John Flavin, as pastor of St. Sebastian and dean of the area, will serve as coordinator of this pastoral project. Periodically, I will review the situation with him and the other pastors. In addition, I will continue to dialogue with them and other interested people as to how we can extend further, as the authentic teaching of the church directs, our pastoral outreach to gay and lesbian Catholics throughout the archdiocese. ■

In the fall of 1986, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter to the world's bishops on the pastoral care of homosexual persons. The text of the letter appeared in Origins, vol. 16, pp. 377ff.

After publication of the letter, a number of bishops took steps in regard to Dignity and to the pastoral care of homosexuals. A letter to priests from Bishop Francis Mugavero of Brooklyn, for example, appeared in Origins, vol. 16, pp. 651f. He said it was his intention "to study the possibility of providing authentic programs of pastoral care for homosexual persons, in full accord with the teaching of the church." He encouraged priests to continue "to provide truly pastoral guidance for homosexual persons" and to "provide the needed encouragement to fully welcome them within the community of Christ, as brothers and sisters."

But Mugavero said that Dignity was an organization that fell within the doctrinal congregation's description of organizations that "seek to undermine the teaching of the church, which are ambiguous about it or which neglect it entirely." Thus Mugavero said: "I direct all pastors, priests and administrators of clearly identifiable Catholic organizations to withdraw any support which may have been given in the past to Dignity or any similar groups. Furthermore, the practice of scheduling religious services or permitting the use of church buildings or the facilities of Catholic schools and colleges, or of any other facility identifiable as Catholic is not to be allowed."

485

A BETTER COURSE

In response to the Vatican statement on homosexuality published in October 1986, a number of bishops in the U.S. instructed the priests of their dioceses to withdraw support for the group of gay and lesbian Catholics known as Dignity. In Brooklyn, for example, Dignity would no longer be allowed to use church buildings for meetings or group-sponsored liturgies. Dignity members, however, were encouraged to attend regularly scheduled Masses, and Bishop Francis Mugavero instructed they be fully welcomed "within the community of Christ."

It seemed at the time—in light of the fearsome consequences of AIDS, the regrettable language used in the Vatican instruction which appeared to countenance violence against

homosexuals, and the positive achievements of Dignity itself—that a more creative avenue for dealing with the situation ought to have been possible.

Until recently, one such alternative avenue seemed to be emerging in Chicago. For more than seventeen years, first under the auspices of the Legion of Mary and then under the sponsorship of Dignity/Chicago, a Sunday Mass specifically for gay and lesbian Catholics had been offered at St. Sebastian Church. For the last two-and-a-half years as well, the pastors of five Chicago parishes have met to assure that the St. Sebastian liturgy continue as an essential element of the pastoral ministry of the archdiocese. In the mind of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, to have canceled the Mass at St. Sebastian would have constituted "a serious pastoral mistake." Nevertheless, there is a tension inherent in all interest-group Masses. There can be a tendency to become self-absorbed or atomized, and thus ultimately separated from communion with the broader worshipping community of which the group is a part. This

penchant constitutes an equally grave, self-defeating mistake. To forestall such an occurrence while assuring the continuity of the special Mass at St. Sebastian, and in light of an increasingly critical stance on the part of Dignity's national leaders toward the church's teaching on homosexual practice, in May Cardinal Bernardin instructed the Chicago parishes themselves to coordinate sponsorship of the Mass. Instead of accepting this solution, the local Dignity chapter split over the issue, the majority voting to move the Mass to the premises of another denomination.

The sad fact is that for the moment the house being put in order appears to be in a worse state than before. But that in no way should detract from the wisdom of Cardinal Bernardin and the Chicago pastors. By maintaining the special liturgy at St. Sebastian under a wide parochial sponsorship, they have not only managed to keep the welcome mat firmly in place. More importantly, they have provided a generous table to return to.

Commonweal Magazine

Sept. 23, 1988

Vol 115, pp 485-6