

Happy Anniversary! It is honor to share some thoughts tonight on our community's 42nd anniversary. Welcome to all our guests tonight. Thank you for your continued support of DignityNY and DignityUSA.

In our first reading, we hear several of the 613 mitzvots or precepts that protected the stranger, widow and orphaned. They were the most vulnerable in the patriarchal society of that time. Mitzvot refers to a moral deed performed as a religious duty.

In the second reading, Paul congratulated the Thessalonians for their deep faith. They had paid attention to Paul's preaching while he was with them. The Thessalonians had become an example throughout the region and beyond!

In the Gospel, when Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees, he tells those present and, by extension us, to love God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. Love others as well as you love yourself.

Roman Catholicism has too many layers of canon law, tradition, magisterium and doctrine that have gotten in the way of loving God and neighbor. Many of us can recall the infamous Halloween letter, officially known as, "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons", that was released late October 1986 during the height of the AIDS crisis. We all know how that letter goes - when Pope Benedict, then a Cardinal wrote, "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." That letter caused tremendous pain - many people have suffered and have continue to suffer physically, spiritually and

mentally from its implications, and the other similar pronouncements over the last 30 years.

The Ratzinger Halloween letter propelled us to action - to come together in ways we had not needed to before. In many ways, it forced us to look at ourselves more critically - to realize that we were wasting our time seeking approval by the hierarchy. It was not going to happen. At the same time across the country, Dignity communities were being expelled from Catholic space. Bishops forbade their priests from presiding at Dignity liturgies which many priests disobeyed. We needed to change to survive. We continue to be extremely grateful to the many Christian communities and other organizations who have welcomed Dignity chapters. Here in New York, 26 years ago, St. John's in the Village Episcopal Church and Fr. Prator did just that, when we were expelled from St. Francis Xavier!

In that tumultuous time, we quickly found our voice — we demonstrated, we participated in the March on Washington, we had many prayerful witnesses outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral — all, to tell our stories of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Catholic to anyone who would listen. It has helped to change not just the minds, but the hearts of many. Our media coverage has improved over the years in thanks to many wonderful and gifted spokespeople.

When we look at the latest Pew Research study, 52% of Americans now support same-sex marriage versus 40% who oppose it. The study also shows 60% of Catholics support same-sex marriage. Those percentages are not surprising but took time to achieve - it took people to see LGBT people as friends, neighbors and co-workers. It

took many National Coming Out Days, Solidarity Sundays, working in coalition with other organizations and conversations with all types of media. We thank John McNeill, a DignityNY founder, who helped lead the way by coming out on the Today Show in 1976 before millions while promoting his groundbreaking book, *The Church and Homosexual*. DignityUSA, when Jim Bussen was President and our own Tom Cunningham was Treasurer, placed a full page ad in Newsweek - a first for a LGBT organization in 1987. Marianne Duddy-Burke, DignityUSA's executive director, has been published many times in Huffington Post and interviewed by numerous newspapers, radio and television programs.

We just saw a very tumultuous Extraordinary Synod on the Family. With a mid-synod report releasing such hopeful statements that included a recognition that 'homosexual persons have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community' and 'It is necessary to accept people in their concrete being... That tone certainly was different than any other Vatican statement in over 30 years. Unfortunately, that tone and along with the statements did not make it to the final report. Instead, doctrine prevailed over love. Catholics worldwide were able to read about the open synod discussion which contained the eventual backlash from the conservative bishops and Curia officials. As Pope Francis exclaimed in his homily at the conclusion of the synod, "God is not afraid of new things! That is why GOD is continually surprising us, opening our hearts and guiding us in unexpected ways." There is hope!

The Synod missed its mark. DignityUSA, along with other member organizations of Women - Church Convergence released a statement titled, "Catholic Women: "Our Absence, Means Synod Lacks Credibility." In that statement, they go on to say, "The egregious omission of women and families in forming Church policy has a devastating impact on Catholics and others worldwide. Instead of an obsession with doctrine, families need the Church to dismantle systems of oppression, work to end violence against women and children, stand firmly against war and the destruction of our planet, recognize women's moral agency, and honor decisions about family life made with informed consciences and prayerful discernment."

If we are to love others as ourselves, we will continue to work with others to make reform in the Church a reality, to make it more Christ like. When we love others as ourselves, we support one another. We are Christ for each other. We are called to heal the other, as Christ healed.

I am always reminded of the acronym WWJD — What would Jesus do? If we can incorporate this in our thoughts, words and deeds, we will continue to change the hearts and minds of those around us to welcome the L-G-B-T and see full inclusion within the Church and society. It can be hard, doable work as long as we look past ourselves to the other. In love we will work together to see many more anniversaries!