

Defiantly Different—Dignity’s Way of Believing Out Loud

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Good evening. Happy Pride. Take a good look around and let your heart swell with emotion as you take in the beauty, integrity, and faith of this community. Rejoice and be glad! Most of all, be proud because you have had a hand in creating this reality out of the tatters of the Roman Catholic Church and a broken world. Here we glimpse and practice what we believe in—a world where all are welcome on our own terms and a church where the Eucharistic table is set for all who wish to celebrate.

My special thanks tonight go to Patricia and Mary Jane for their kind invitation. I thank all of the leadership of Dignity NY for inviting me to be here on the eve of the Feast of Saint John in this his namesake church. Thank you to the congregation and leadership of St. John’s in the Village for your gracious and warm hospitality. We of Dignity feel most welcome. What an auspicious night to kindle the fire and feast as people do all over the world.

On this 49th year since Stonewall, this 46th year since the founding Dignity New York, and this 31st year of Dignity NY’s exile from the kyriarchal Catholic Church, I daresay there are few people in New York City tonight who know as much as we do about being “Defiantly Different,” the well-chosen theme for this year’s NY Pride celebration.

We of Dignity have a long history both here in New York City and around the world of defying conventions and of being as different as you please. Our defiant

difference is our gift to a world and a church that demand our conformity and would prefer to reward us for lying. Instead, we offer our true, transparent, flawed, but proud selves, come what may. We embody defiant difference not from spite or malice but because of our love in an often-hateful culture.

We have found one another, so many good Catholics and our friends who envision justice and equality for all, not just for LGBTIQ people, but for everyone, beginning with the most marginalized. We take seriously today's reading from Isaiah (49:6) -- "I will make you a light of the nations so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth." We aren't just lights for our queer community, but we work for a robust justice agenda, defying the conventions of elitism, racism, sexism, and ecocide as fervently as we defy heterosexist, cis gender, transphobic social mores.

I confess that I have not been in a party mood this Pride season. In fact, this week I have felt more ashamed than proud. This is not about me, nor is it about Dignity—God knows we work overtime. We support and act in solidarity with all who are made poor by unjust economic systems, those whose medical insurance does not cover their medical needs, elderly poor who need housing, people of color for whom racism is an early death sentence. All of these efforts are reason to be proud. We demonstrate that we "get it." We get that queer oppression is integrally connected with other forms of discrimination and unfairness. We get that our struggles are linked.

Still, I feel ashamed. It is not a personal neurotic feeling, but a globalized sense that something is radically wrong.

What shames me is that I live in a country where children are taken from their parents, where immigrants fleeing domestic and gang violence are turned away, where

thousands of children are still in legal limbo and God alone knows where they are. This is shameful and the blame rests squarely at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC and all who collaborate with those forces. Rachel Maddow closed one of her recent shows crying bitter tears for all to see as she tried to report news of children separated from their parents. I'm with her. This is cause for weeping. And yes, this national shame intrudes on my pride celebration. It makes me defiantly different. Basta- enough; nunca mas—never again.

In a similar way, I am ashamed to be connected with a Roman Catholic Church that gets it right on immigration but wrong about lots of other important things that cause harm. It is embarrassing to have a pope who in 2018 could utter these words: “It is painful to say this today: People speak of varied families, of various kinds of family [. . .but] the family [as] man and woman in the image of God is the only one.” Please. How wrong can a person be?

If Francis were sitting here, I would ask how painful he imagines it might be to hear such theological claptrap. I would politely invite him to mitigate his misery by opening his eyes to the reality of millions of good people who live in every conceivable family constellation, the common ingredient being love. Yes, we are defiantly different from such utter nonsense.

My lesbian pride is offended when soon-to-be cardinal Luis Ladaria, Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, claims as “definitive” the speculative notion that “Christ wanted to give this sacrament [of holy orders] to the twelve apostles, all men, who, in turn, transmitted it to other men” (May 29, 2018, *L'Osservatore Romano*). Note he offers not the least shred of evidence. Shameless.

Beware such bald statements from people who were no more there on the early Christian scene than we were, and no more know the mind of Christ than we do. How shameful for a church leader to pedal such a ridiculous notion, as if we who read it do not know better. Clearly he prefers that the Catholic community be robbed of women's leadership and decision-making rather than having to let go of what he probably learned in his Confirmation class. Yes, I am defiantly different on this score too.

More shame comes from the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, which is reeling with the news of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's sexual misconduct. The Vatican has removed him from ministry, ending his six-decade career in deep disgrace. Not only was he credibly accused of sexually abusing a teen some fifty years ago, but also apparently he settled two other cases of sex with adult men in New Jersey dioceses.

What stuns about Cardinal McCarrick is that we still do not know when the cases happened or when or how they were settled. Did he become a bishop and a cardinal with people knowing? Did he perpetrate while in high office? What we can be sure of is that these egregious uses of church money were no barrier to his ascension into the highest ranks of the clergy. Surely he didn't have outside income to pay his legal bills and pay off the survivors. Sadly, in his twilight years when he can no longer recall the specifics, a man who did important political work and supported changes in church practice on sex abuse becomes the poster boy of the apparently very commonplace experience of clergy sexual abuse and cover-up. I am glad to be defiantly different from all that.

Queer Catholics are defiantly different in our own church, which is good practice for being defiantly different in the larger world. We bring the same careful discernment to the social scene that we bring to the church—expecting people to value all bodies, not

just the young; seeing our right to jobs, housing, adoption, and marriage as still tenuous and in need of defense, but equally putting our vast resources—money of course, but also brilliant, committed people—to the service of workers’ rights, Black Lives Matter, stopping wars, ending crimes against trans people, eradicating police brutality, and guaranteeing women’s reproductive health care. By so doing, we find ourselves in direct line with John the Baptist and Jesus whose messages to feed, clothe, give drink and so forth are the foundation of our ethic.

Recall in the Lukan account that people were quite confused by John. His name was in dispute; God seemed to have chosen him but the why was not clear; his formerly mute father was suddenly able to talk when he affirmed his son’s name. The young boy carried heavy expectations all of his life. No wonder when Jesus came along John was somewhat relieved to retire from center stage and let Jesus do the heavy lifting. As the story plays out in John 3:30, one had to decrease for the other to increase. John didn’t seem to mind.

As I read the story, the same dynamic played out again in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus eventually went the way of John the Baptist and left the heavy lifting to us. We are not used to thinking about it in those terms. But the reality is that we are the descendants of the early Christian communities who accepted the challenges to engage in sacrament and solidarity long after Jesus departed this world. That is what it means to be a Christian.

That is why we feel shame along with pride this season. The gap between what we envision as Christians and what we live is so big; some days, like this week, it seems to be growing larger than we can manage. Still, what makes the Christian approach

defiantly different—not better necessarily than other worldviews but different-- is that the story does not end with the death of Jesus. It continues from the empty tomb through tomorrow. Each person and community in between is an integral part of the story, charged with the same responsibility as John and Jesus to do the work of the Divine. There is no limit to our defiance or to our difference in doing so.

Let us celebrate the queer pioneers who got us started, those who have kept the movements for our liberation going, and those who transgress in new and previously unimaginable ways. We would not be queer Catholics if we were all in lockstep. Our diversity is essential to our defiant difference.

In our era, a real challenge is to explain why we still stay identified with the Christian much less the Catholic tradition when these have been shown to be flawed by sexism, racism, hetero-normativity, and the like. I understand the question. I ask myself that question on a regular basis. After a while, pointing to the Met Gala as a jewel in our crown does not quite make it.

So I look deeper, thinking of John and Jesus, the Marys and Martha, and us, for how we can bring our Catholic religious values into the mainstream without being accused of passing over the shortcomings of our faith tradition. The best strategy I employ comes from my friend the religious musician David Lohman, whose struggle to make our churches welcoming and inclusive reflect the John-Jesus-us trajectory. Listen to the words of one of his most dynamic anthems “Believe Out Loud”:

“Believe Out Loud”

David Lohman, 2010 Welcome Song Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQq0FIOukaA>

It’s time to believe out loud, no more staying silent.

It’s time to proclaim aloud, the faith that we hold dear.

It’s time to reach out to the rejected.

It’s time to stand up and say, “No more!”

It’s time to create a church in this day where everyone’s welcomed in the door.

It’s time to believe out loud,

It’s time to be strong and proud,

It’s time to believe, believe out loud.

Once I believe out loud, my pride comes surging back. I am refocused on why being defiantly different is so important and so effective. Think of it tomorrow when a group stands in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in prayer and singing, when our contingent marches on Fifth Avenue with “Dignity” as the identifying word. Think of the thousands of people who will see us as a touchstone to their own defiantly different faith, a link to their own social justice commitment, a reason for their own pride. We begin that manifestation right here and now as we share the Eucharist, defiantly different from what some church officials can imagine, but believing out loud with all our hearts in the well-founded hope that we can and must make a world of difference. I feel more pride than shame, more power than oppression, more love than hate, more life than death.

Happy Pride! Wear it and strut it and move it as if our eternal life depends on it.

That's John's way, Jesus' way, the Dignity way, the divine way, our way.

Thank you and blessed be. On to the welcome table together.