

## Oral History Interview: Patrick McArron

Interviewee: Patrick McArron

Interviewer: Heather Rachelle White

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Heather W.: Okay.

Pat M: How much time does it record?

Heather W It has four hours.

Pat M Oh, that's fantastic.

Heather W. Plenty of time.

Pat M. Okey doke.

Heather W Okay, well first go ahead and state your name.

Pat M. Pat McArron. San Diego, California. Current president of the San Diego chapter of Dignity, and former national president of DignityUSA.

Heather W Maybe I should sit over here so I don't – well, that's fine. Oh, that's good, yeah, that's good, that way you don't have to move your neck all the way over [laughter]. Well, you've told me this, but where and when were you born?

Pat. M. San Diego, 1947. Lived here all my life.

Heather W And can you tell me something about growing up in the Catholic Church?

Pat M.

Yeah. Let's see, I was raised in the Catholic Church from birth. My father was a Protestant, my mother was a Catholic – *is* a Catholic. My dad has since been deceased several years; my mother continues to live here in San Diego. I went to Catholic education all the way through high school. Graduated from Catholic High and then applied for the seminary, and I was resoundingly rejected for the diocesan seminary here in San Diego based on the premise that I was homosexual – not gay – that I was homosexual and needed therapy before I could be considered a viable candidate for the priesthood. And this was the recommendation of the rector of the seminary here in San Diego, all of which came as quite a shock to me because I was not even willing to accept that I was gay at the time – I was in denial – and so I left feeling pretty low, had to break the news to my parents, and I was at that time living with my parents. My dad was angry because he was Protestant and didn't want me to become a priest anyway, and then to be rejected by the church made him mad. My mom was devastated, and she handled it very, very badly, but got over it. And to my benefit my father chose to ignore the rector's advice and pretend like nothing happened, so I never went to reparative therapy and we just pretended like the whole episode never happened.

So then I went to public college for the first time in my life, and that was a real eye-opener for me because it gave me a whole other way of looking at life in general instead of just through Catholic eyes, and I still had a burning desire to be a priest, so I applied for the seminary again. But this time I thought I'd be clever and rather than go through a rejection a second time around with the diocesan seminary, I decided to apply for two religious orders: one was the Columban Fathers and the other was the Priests of the Sacred Heart. And to my surprise, they both accepted me. So then I had the interesting quandary of deciding which one to go with, and I ended up going with the Priests of the Sacred Heart, and ended up going into what they call a preparatory school for a year to prepare me for the novitiate the following year. And during my novitiate I was enjoying the seminary life, I had my own room – in fact I had my own room from the day that I entered the seminary, I didn't have to share my room with anybody like in a dorm,

or anything like that. And loved it, but probably, without my own knowledge, there was a lot of turmoil going on inside and I wasn't dealing with it very well, and I was called into the rector's office – actually pulled out of class, and was delivered the news that I would have to leave the seminary, and again I was devastated, and the rector at the time had told me that this was a decision that they had given a lot of thought to. And I looked at him and I said, “Well, what's the reason that I have to leave the seminary?” And he looked at me and he says, “Well, we can't tell you that now but someday you'll understand.” This was back in the 1970's, well actually late 1960's, and that was typical, I learned later on, that was a typical way of dealing with rejections in the seminary. They wouldn't give you a reason.

And so, once again, I had to deal with telling my parents, and put on a train in St. Louis and headed back home. And the upshot of that was I stopped looking towards the priesthood as a way for me to seek out a career or vocation or whatever, just went back to college again, ended up working for the government; and again, my parents just kind of put that behind them and pretended like the episode didn't happen, as best they could. And two-thirds of my class ended up leaving the seminary that year. Part of them left out of protest for the way I was treated, and the others – I don't really know what reasons, whether they left on their own or if they were determined not to be viable candidates. But again, you know, any number of reasons why I was told to leave the seminary.

But then [laughter], being the dysfunctional Catholic that I was, then I ended up getting married. And this was a woman that I had met at San Diego State University. I wasn't a student at the university, but I was working at the Catholic Newman Center on campus, and I was working for the chaplain, as his part-time secretary, and he ended up becoming bishop of one of the dioceses, so the connections were interesting as things went on over the years. And he, of course, had no idea that he was going to become a bishop when he was working at the university. But that's when I met Judy. She and I ended up dating for a while, to make a long story short, we got married – her parents were ecstatic; my parents

were ecstatic. We had a huge wedding, and ultimately, of course, it was a mistake. And so after a year and a half we both agreed that we needed to go our separate ways. [phone rings] And that's my phone. Can I get my phone? [laughter]

[End of audio file 1]

[Begin audio file 2]

So anyway, we decided to part, amicably – it was tough, for both of us. Again, I was in denial when I married Judy. And, interestingly enough – you just never know what direction your life is going to take – but in this instance, in this case, a Catholic young man, rejected by the seminary twice, et cetera, not dealing with his homosexuality...it was a Jewish therapist who was the one that brought me out. Judy and I sought a counselor that we both knew, a mutual friend, and in one session she was able to get me to finally accept who I was *and* not be ashamed – first time in my life, and I think I was like age 21, 22 years old, if I remember correctly, when this happened, and it's the classic story. I felt like a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. So it was one of those mixed blessings where one relationship had to end, and then I was able to actually, you know, fulfill who I was.

Well, down the road, my then ex-wife ended up dealing with her own sexual orientation and came to realize that she was lesbian, or at the very least, bisexual, and ended up after a second failed marriage which only lasted a few weeks – and that was a terrible situation for her – then she started dating some women and ended up getting into some pretty good relationships. We've remained friends over the years, *and* in addition to which we both became very involved in Dignity, later on, and not only was I president of the local chapter back in the 70's – she ended up becoming a local chapter president. She and I both ended up becoming national officers of Dignity at separate times. You just never know. Yeah, yeah. And because of our situation, and the uniqueness of our situation, we were able to actually take our situation and use it in speaking engagements. So periodically

Judy and I, when we were still both living in San Diego, we would actually go to the campuses and speak to the students, which made for a very interesting venue: former husband and wife talking about sexual orientation, et cetera, so that was really interesting. So that gives you a little bit of a background of where I'm coming from.

Heather W. But at some point you said you started attending the Metropolitan Community Church?

Pat. M. Correct. Yes, that was my first...I'm not quite sure how I heard about MCC, it was probably through the local gay press, or my contact with maybe a handful of people here in town at the time, that's probably how I first heard about MCC. I started attending there services because I still had strong spiritual feelings at the time – didn't feel all that comfortable continuing with going to parish Mass 'cause I felt somewhat isolated. It just didn't feel right to continue going to a Catholic Mass and not being able to express who I was. So MCC was a perfect opportunity for me. Their services, particularly here in San Diego, were very Catholic in orientation because locally a lot of the people who were attending MCC and who were also pastoring were from a Catholic tradition. So it was even easier for me to feel like I fit right in. So I became a member of the MCC church and attended that for about a year or a year and a half, when I finally heard about the Dignity organization in 1972.

Heather W. Can you tell me a little more about what the services were like at the MCC, for them to be very Catholic?

Pat M. They were almost identical, quite frankly. The services that I was attending back then at MCC were almost identical to a Catholic Mass in their format, with the readings and Communion, the whole bit. It was as if you were attending a Catholic Mass. So it just, you know, didn't feel any different – other than the fact that everyone who was attending the Mass, virtually everyone was gay or lesbian. And...at that time the MCC church was meeting at a Methodist church, and just

like any regular parish, after Mass or after worship service was over, we would have a great big social in the hall afterwards, and dinners and the whole bit, and it was a pretty good sized group. And they grew over the years as well, and moved on in different locations.

Heather W. When you found out about Dignity, that seemed like a –

Pat M. Yeah, when I found out about Dignity – and that came about through another friend of mine who was a former Catholic nun, she had just left about a year or two earlier, she had left twenty-five years as a nun with a religious order in Santa Barbara, California, a cloistered convent. She herself was not cloistered; she was able to leave the convent from time to time because she was Assistant Mother Superior at the convent. But after twenty-five years there she literally made a decision, almost overnight, that that wasn't where she wanted to go anymore. So she just made the conscious decision to leave the religious order and go into nursing. So she became a nurse, an RN. And that's when I got to know her, and we lived fairly close to one another geographically, and she happened to be perusing the National Catholic Reporter newspaper and saw a little tiny ad in the classified section of the paper about gay Catholics, and she immediately pointed it out to me and said, "This is something you might be interested in." And sure enough I couldn't wait to make contact because I thought, wow, you know, what's this all about? And then I just took off with it as soon as I saw the ad.

Heather W. At that point was Dignity meeting in San Diego or was it up in LA?

Pat M. No, at that point in time, when I saw the ad in the newspaper, Dignity was not meeting in San Diego – it had already moved on, from San Diego to Los Angeles. It had been meeting here in San Diego from about mid-1969, under the direction of the original founder Father Pat Nidorf—and met here for several months, then he started commuting to Los Angeles because he was starting to get inquiries from LA. And so he would go up there and meet with a bunch of gay men in LA, Catholic gay men, and because of the size of the city of LA, et cetera, it grew

quite rapidly up in that area. And so, basically the group that he started in San Diego, which was a therapy group...that's how Dignity got started, it literally got started as a therapy group, but obviously therapy with a different bent – not with the intent to change you, but to get you to embrace and accept your homosexuality, as opposed to try and change. And, which needless to say was not only revolutionary at the time, but extremely controversial as well. And he had a huge success with the men that he met, and they were able to just continue their own conversations without needing him to continue to lead the group, so he continued his work up in LA. Until the archdiocese got wind of the fact that he was doing that, and then they clamped down on him, and the archbishop literally told him he was no longer welcome in the LA Diocese. Well, by that time Dignity was strong enough to be able to move forward on its own without the assistance of Pat Nidorf. And then, in 1972, approximately three years after the group started, that's when I got into the picture, contacted them up in LA, met with then the national coordinator, Joseph Gilgamesh. And Gilgamesh, of course, was a pseudonym, his real last name was Killian. And so...Joe literally challenged me at that time in 1972, and said, "Why don't you start a chapter of Dignity in San Diego?" And I said, "Well, sure I'd be happy to, that's great, but I don't know anybody in San Diego who's gay." And which at that time I didn't.

Heather W. Not even folks at the MCC?

Pat M. Well, yes, MCC. But I figured none of them would be particularly interested in Dignity, because they were all pretty much involved in. And I said, I'm not sure who the gay Catholics are in San Diego, and so Joe's response to that was – "Don't worry about that, we'll take care of that part. You take care of the coordination; we'll make the contacts." Which, in fact, Joe did. He knew someone already in San Diego by the name of Patrick McSweeney who already had numerous contacts, so Patrick and I got together, and with his ability to make the contacts and my ability to coordinate things we started the chapter in San Diego. And the first meeting was held in my home, in Santee, and we had a dozen

people, literally, for the first night, and we rapidly started organizing and growing and growing and it just continued to grow for several years, so...

Heather W. Were any of the people who were involved in that first meeting, did any of them attend earlier, like Patrick's meeting, or was it an all new group?

Pat M. No, it was an all new group, never knew the people – at least as I can recall, never knew the people who were in the original group that Pat had started. They had all gone on to other things and so on and so forth. And most of the people that we had contact with were people who had already communicated via mail with the national structure in Los Angeles, and mail was pouring in daily, literally daily.

Heather W. I'm going to ask about that in a second.

Pat M. Okay.

Heather W. But I'm interested in hearing more about what meetings were like.

Pat. M. The meetings.

Heather W. When you first started meeting...

Pat M. Right, the meetings. The meetings were very basic. Basically what we did was when we first started meeting as a group we had mostly men, a handful of women were involved, including the woman that I had mentioned who – the former Catholic nun, Angela Savoie. Who, at that time, was not identifying as being a lesbian. Don't even know if she knew she was lesbian, but...so she would attend the meetings as well. And what we did primarily in those initial meetings was just try to figure out how to organize, and how to publicize who we were and how to get in touch with us. So it was a real learning experience for all of us, we didn't have – we had prayer services to start with, and then we started having home

Masses. We'd make contact over a period of time with some of the local priests – which was another whole dynamic in the early years of Dignity.

In the early years of Dignity, when we basically caught the official Catholic structure off-guard – to put it in perspective, what ended up happening was, in the early stages of Dignity it was a grassroots organization, and it was fulfilling a need that wasn't being provided pastorally or otherwise by the Church. And so what ended up happening is that the bishops in the church of the United States took a look at Dignity with some trepidation, and they quietly let us go about our business and didn't make a lot of waves and we, as we progressed we were literally meeting in Catholic facilities all across the country – Catholic parishes, churches, and so forth. And, I think what really tipped the scale for the bishops of the Church was that again in the 70's, in the later 70's, Dignity was becoming more known as a gay Catholic organization. It was no longer something that was quiet and under the radar – now it was becoming known, and the bishops were literally being faced, had to face the issue because you would have the conservative element in the Catholic Church that would say, "How can you let this go on? This needs your attention." So that created a whole new dynamic. Now, prior to that happening, Catholic priests who definitely identified as being gay were literally gravitating towards Dignity, because like everyone else who were in the closet, they felt like they had a place where they could be themselves and not live a double life. So when they came to Dignity gatherings, they could celebrate Mass, they could even preside at Mass openly and it was quite a dynamic at that time. And in fact locally, in San Diego, we had forty chaplains.

Heather W. Wow.

Pat M. Forty. I know. It was mind boggling.

Heather W. This was at the very beginning?

Pat M.

At the very beginning. I mean they were literally coming out of the woodwork. It was a remarkable situation because priests from all over the diocese, all different parishes, who were gay, when they heard about Dignity they wanted to celebrate with us because they felt this was really a terrific thing, and they were almost kind of like vying for an opportunity to celebrate Mass. So we had the envious position of picking and choosing who's going to celebrate Mass from week to week, and in fact what ended up happening is sometimes we would have two or three priests concelebrating a Mass – so it was really quite an unusual situation in those early stages of Dignity in the 70's. And we literally...in San Diego, for example, which is typical of what happened in a number of other cities around the country, I'm sure, we would first meet in homes. Then we would look for a place where we could be hosted. In San Diego's case, we never really met at a quote "traditional Catholic parish" church. What we did do was we met at a Catholic facility in what's known as Old-Town San Diego, our historic roots of the city. And the name of the facility was Cardijn Center, named after Bishop or Cardinal Cardijn from France. It was kind of a Catholic worker movement organization. And so the Cardijn Center was very popular here in San Diego, had a great pastor – Father Leo – chaplain, I should say, and he opened the doors for us and said "you're more than welcome to meet here." And so we met there for several years, and literally celebrated Mass in the basement of the building which we affectionately called our Catacombs. [laughter] We literally called it our Catacombs and we had – we were so thrilled at having a place that we could meet, we decorated it, we painted it, we made curtains for it, we did all kinds of stuff. And it was a huge space, which is why we met down in the basement rather than upstairs, which wasn't really all that convenient upstairs to meet, and it was a two-story building, so there were offices and so on and so forth. So it worked out pretty good for several years. The only reason we left that building was because the Cardijn Organization itself was starting to decline and the diocese itself decided to...well, actually it was somewhat of an independent – it was Catholic, with the approval of the bishop and the diocese, but the organization I think owned the building, not the diocese, and they decided to sell the property and disperse. So we were forced to look for a new home then, just out of circumstance.

Heather W. And where did you go after that?

Pat M. After we left the Cardijn Center, if I remember correctly, we moved to a real estate building, which had a very large hall on the ground floor, and we rented that space on a weekly basis for a while. And meanwhile, we were looking for something that was more agreeable and we ended up moving into the MCC church. And that ended up working out really well. It was the perfect venue for us because it was a church, it had all the facilities that we needed. And so we would meet there on a weekly basis for ten years. And that was literally only a few doors away from where we were meeting prior, in this real estate building. But MCC was growing to the point where it was becoming more and more difficult for us to be able to get the space when we needed it. So again we had to look for another home to celebrate, and we ultimately ended up at our current location, which is the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Hillcrest, and we've been there for approximately thirteen years if I remember correctly. And at one point in our history we actually had our own building. Dignity San Diego had its own building, which we were renting, and it was a house on Park Boulevard; and we were renting it from one of our members who was a real estate agent and loved the organization and she would rent her – this house to us at a very reasonable rate, which was still expensive for us as a small group. But we rented it for awhile – I forget, it was a couple of years – we had a big sign out in front of that house that said Dignity Center on it. And so it was pretty good, but again, it wasn't adequate – it was too small for our purposes, and so we decided to give that up and like I said, ultimately end up where we are now. And that's worked out real well. They've been great to us, the facilities are perfect, et cetera. So.

Heather W. I've noticed – well, there's a number of other chapters, it was very important to them to be in, on Catholic territory...

Pat M. The Catholic connection, yeah. It was. And...it made sense, quite frankly – being a Catholic organization. What...it was a very traumatic experience for a lot of

chapters, when they were told that they could no longer meet on Catholic ground. It was very traumatic. We lost a lot of members at that point and time when that happened. I believe that was 1978, if I remember correctly, I believe. I'd have to look at my records.

Heather W. I can always go and get the precise date, as long as I get a ballpark figure.  
[laughter]

Pat M. But for San Diego we were in a position where it had been years since we'd been meeting in a Catholic facility anyway, so we were never effected quite as heavily as most other chapters were, who had the advantage of being able to celebrate Mass in a Catholic church, and we never did have that so...so...but yeah, it was tough, so...yeah...

Heather W. I'm interested in the...were there...was it common for other organizations to have priests practicing, saying Mass, in places that weren't in one of the churches? Was that, having a home Mass or having a Mass in the basement of a different kind of building, was that at all a big deal? I'm just not familiar with what that would have been – what that would have meant – just for it not to have been a Mass set within a church...

Pat M. Oh, I see. Well...that's a good question. [laughter] I would say it probably had a lot to do – the differences probably had a lot to do with the people who were taking leadership roles in the local chapters at the time. Like any other venue you'll have conservative gay Catholics, as well as liberal gay Catholics. And so if the leadership in a particular community were shall we say “traditionalist Catholic,” they would look for all of the bells and smells, the surroundings, the trappings, all of which was very important to them for the celebration of Mass; whereas in some communities you might have people who were far less influenced by that aspect and were just looking towards the spiritual aspect strictly, without all of the trappings that go with it. You'd have some chapters that would be very experimental – San Diego was one – where things would be very

experimental and flexible with the way we would celebrate Mass. It wouldn't necessarily always follow a traditional format. So it would vary. And typically, when you have a home Mass – and this applies to many communities within the Catholic Church, not just Dignity – the Mass will be a very relaxed and a very open type of structure. And there's always been that element where people enjoy the home-Mass aspect. We haven't actually done that in our local chapter for many, many years. But there are actually some communities that continue to emphasize the value of a home Mass, and that's what they go to on a regular basis, will be someone's home for Mass.

Heather W. Interesting.

Pat M. And the chaplain situation, of course, would change over the years. We would lose a lot of chaplains because of fear from their bishops, fear from their religious orders that they would lose their jobs or whatever. Which, you know, it has to be said, there's that continuing tremendous dysfunctional attitude within the church structure, it's almost built-in, that creates a lot of the problems that exist around sexuality. And I think what's really, really happened with a lot of our gay priests, for example, they've been – they *feel like* they've been forced into a situation where they have to live a double life, which takes its toll over time. And it becomes a real structure and a real issue for some of those priests. Many have ultimately made the decision to leave the priesthood because they no longer could handle that dual role. Pretending to be something they weren't, you know?

Heather W. Right. Yeah. And you had mentioned earlier, that Dignity did kind of serve a role where people came, got what they needed, and then moved on –

Pat M. Yeah. One of the functions that Dignity has always been able to provide just by the nature of the organization, is it's given people an opportunity to accept who they are, come to a very supportive atmosphere, get from that what they need to be able to carry on with their own lives in whatever direction they go. For some people the Dignity organization has become an alternative to their parish, which is

true in my case. I stopped going to a traditional parish Mass many years ago. It's a personal decision – for me, it was too...what's the word I'm looking for...um...I know there's a specific word...anonymous isn't the right word...but it just didn't feel quite right to me. Worshipping, celebrating Mass with a bunch of strangers and then leaving. I always enjoyed the fact that when you participate in a small-faith community Mass you get to know the people around you, you can support each other, become friends, etc, etc. And it's not just fulfilling a quote “weekly obligation to celebrate Mass.” And so it varies with people. We'll have some people, for example, who continue to participate in their local parish and come to Dignity, and they'll do both, so...

Heather W. Now for priests who came in, was there also that kind of revolving door, if I can call it that, for priests who would come reconcile – were there numbers of them who left the Catholic church after involvement with Dignity?

Pat. M. A lot of them left. A lot of them left the Catholic Church, ultimately. And...a revolving door – not so much a revolving door. A lot of the priests who came to Dignity came for the spiritual openness that they experienced, but again, what ended up happening was, it was that duplicity, and they loved the work that they were doing as priests, whatever it was – in a parish, in a teaching experience in schools – and their association with Dignity ended up becoming a jeopardy to them, so they would have to stop going to Dignity. And that, I think, is what created the tension for many of the priests, because now they had to again put that in the background and pretend to be something else, and that was a real struggle for a lot of priests. And so they ended up ultimately leaving the church. So – and today, we still have some gay priests who continue to work in the parish structure, and, frankly, I don't know how they do it. They're living a secret life, or so they think, in some cases. And we still have instances, you know, where we've got gay priests who end up becoming found out by somebody in the parish and then somebody makes a big stink about it. And especially in the case of a priest – and this would apply both to straight and gay priests – a priest who feels like they need to be in a relationship with one person, that again: that's where the

dysfunctional comes in. And that's another whole issue of course, which is not a primary goal of Dignity, but we do deal with it – the fact that priests are still required to be celibate whether they be straight or gay. For that matter, the official position of the Catholic Church is that all gay people be celibate. And of course – that's what makes Dignity different from, say, Courage, which is an officially recognized organization within the Catholic Church, unfortunately. That's very scary; we consider Courage to be very dangerous. They obviously mean well, but it's a reparative organization. Its intention is to change you, and at the very least they will continue to tell you, okay, um... That's another interesting thing about Courage – they normally do not use the word “gay.” They will refer to you as “same-sex attraction.” So everyone who is in the Courage organization is SSA, and it's just incredible. And they'll tell people, you know, “Your religious beliefs etc. and your strength for God etc. etc. will carry you through and you can fight these urges to express yourself sexually...” and all this stuff, oh my God. What a danger. What a danger. So. So that's, you know, it's become fairly common knowledge within the Catholic church now, when Cardinal Ratzinger had issued that horrible letter that was expressly directed towards Dignity – even without mentioning our name, everyone knew...

Heather W. In the mid 80's, that came out?

Pat M. Hm-mm, that was the one that literally changed everything, and basically said that Dignity was no longer welcome on the Catholic parishes because of our position. And also, it should be noted that we were given a “chance,” quote-unquote, we were given a chance to change our position, and if we changed our position we would continue to be welcome to celebrate and function as an organization in the Catholic parishes, but we consciously decided at a convention in Miami to not change our position. In fact we strengthened our position based on that ultimatum from the Vatican. And so that set things in motion. And so, obviously, as an organization we had to live with our decision, and we never regretted it as an organization, never regretted it. So our only regret is that the church hierarchy continues to be so resistant to change. Yeah.

Heather W. That's one thing that's remarkable about Dignity, especially in comparison to many of the other caucus groups. Dignity benefited in many cases from a remarkable degree of openness at the beginning especially in comparison to what happened later on...

Pat M. That's right.

Heather W. ...and I also wondered if there was kind of a moment post-Vatican II where, if that might have influenced this stance of the bishops and priests, you know?

Pat M. And it did. I think Vatican II is what had a major impact on the beginning of Dignity. It would be wonderful if you could interview Pat Nidorf. The one single figure who started all this. He has a wonderful quote that you can find on the San Diego chapter website, for example, where he just didn't realize that when he started Dignity in 1969, what a huge issue it was going to become, he had no idea. But he felt compelled to do something as an individual, because as an individual he was already dealing on a pastoral level with gay men who were Catholic, and who were struggling with reconciling their sexual orientation with their Catholic faith. And so based on that, that's when he decided to create a group, a counseling group, and then the rest became history and grew into this organization known as Dignity. And literally grew like wildfire, spread like crazy all across the country, which was a clear indication that there was a huge need for something like this, you know.

And as times changed and as the years went on what ended up happening, quite frankly I think, is that a lot of people today – and it might be because of my own liberal position and my liberal attitude that I'm not that in touch with the conservative element – but it seems to me that a lot of people today reject organized religion altogether and just choose to live their lives as best they can without, you know, seeking input from some religious organization, which is one of the reasons why we lost a bunch of the members from Dignity. I mean, quite

frankly they said, if this is the way the Catholic Church is going to continue to treat me as an individual, why should I continue to put up with that? And that's what ended up happening: a lot of people said "I'm not going to put up with this any more," and they just literally walked away. Said, "That's it – you're not going to do this to me anymore." Those of us who have chosen to stay within and stay on, we do so because we don't want the Catholic hierarchy to continue to hurt people, which is what they're doing, they're continuing to hurt people. They think they're doing something good; we think they're doing something very bad. And we're not going to let them get away with it.

So...and the stuff that the Vatican's come out with in the past few years has been horrendous, absolutely horrendous. So – anything but Christian [laughing], wait a minute, what's this all about [laughing]. And the real corker, of course, was when they made changes in the Catholic catechism, and literally in the new Catholic catechism started calling gay and lesbian people "disordered" and "intrinsically evil" – I mean, c'mon, just...ridiculous, ridiculous. And as I've told you before, too, personally I don't – I feel like I have grown to the point where I don't rely on my Catholic background for support. I think I've matured enough where I know what I need to do to live a good life, be good to other people, be good to myself, et cetera. I don't have to turn to the church and say, "Well now, what do I need to do? What direction do I go," et cetera – I don't need that. For all those people out there who continue to look to the Catholic Church for some kind of guidance, we don't want them to continue to get the wrong kind of guidance because it's only going to damage them along down the road, as we see it. That's Dignity's point of view, which obviously is completely contrary to an organization like Courage, which toes the line as it were. So we're hopeful that in time things will change. We know that it's a struggle – the church is slow to change on anything. But change it does, but it takes time. But the organization has had a tough road. I mean, it's an all-volunteer organization, but there has been, again, there's been an increase in membership in the past couple of years.

Heather W. Really?

Pat M. Yeah, there's actually been an increase in membership. I think part of it has to do with the fact that some people who weren't interested in getting involved in an organization like Dignity now look at us and say, "You know what? There's been too much stuff that's come out that's so negative, we're starting to get upset." So now we have a lot of people joining the organization who aren't gay and support what we do.

Heather W. Wow, great!

Pat M. So yeah.

Heather W. I told you that I was going to ask about the communication, letter writing.

Pat M. Yeah, yes.

Heather W. One part of what I have seen working at the archives in Los Angeles are all these letters mailed to Joe Gilgamesh, Gillian, mostly from priests.

Pat M. Yes, a lot of stuff. I have in fact – let me see if I can't pull a few out. I have huge archives of my own, let's see if I can find something here [away from mike, apparently looking for letters, inaudible]. No, I don't have those letters in this box. But you're quite right. In fact, what happened was that -- in the very beginning of Dignity the mail was so heavy that was coming into the P.O. box in Los Angeles, they couldn't handle it all. So what they ended up doing is they farmed some of the letters out to other people, and I was one of the people that they farmed the letters out to. And they would literally, what they would do is they would take a stack of letters and they would bundle them up and send them to me in an envelope down to San Diego, and I would take each letter one by one and respond to them. Now mind you, this was back in the days before we had computers, and..

Heather W. No saving a draft for everybody.

Pat M. Right, exactly. So it was very tedious and also very rewarding. And you know it's been a little while since I looked at some of those letters and it is really something to look back on where people were coming from. And it's interesting because you still – it breaks my heart, because I still hear from people today, not nearly as much, but I still hear from some people who are so hung up on what the Catholic Church has to say about something that it continues to be a huge struggle for some of these people. And you know, coming from my own personal background and what I've been through, I just want to take these people and shake them and say, "Look, you've got a brain, you know how to think for yourself, don't let somebody else tell you how to live your life. Don't relinquish your own ability to make positive good decisions."

And, in fact, one of the lesser known aspects of the Catholic faith is the primacy of conscience, that is the ultimate and it's part of Catholic doctrine, Catholic dogma, that your conscience is the primary guidance to what you should do with your life. If your conscience tells you that what you feel and believe is contradictory to something that you're being taught through the Church your conscience is the ultimate guide, even the Catholic Church will tell you that. So you can say, "I don't agree with this – I don't agree with that teaching," and the Church will say, "What does your conscience tell you?" After all that you've read and you've studied and so on and so forth, if you still don't agree with that particular position, that's alright, because the worst thing you can do is go against your conscience. So that's what we have to remind people, you know, in that respect. But yeah, the correspondence was really something. Personally – it might be because of the correspondence that I was sent – I don't remember a lot of the correspondence coming strictly from priests. It was from a lot of confused lay people, and young people.

Heather W. It seemed that one thing the correspondence did was allow Dignity – exactly what you were talking about earlier -- about getting people in touch with other people...

Pat M. Exactly, that's right, yeah..

Heather W. It cracked me up sometimes to – some of the letters would send, you know, so and so priest in especially Louisville, Kentucky...

Pat M. Right, yes.

Heather W. was one I remember, well here are three other people ...

Pat M. in your own community,

Heather W. if you can get in touch with them – that was one way that he tried to...

Pat M. Right, yeah, exactly.

Heather W. get people together to start chapters.

Pat M. Yeah, that's right. That's how it worked. It was that simple. Yup. And that just goes to illustrate how isolated, particularly back in those times, how isolated everybody felt.

Heather W. You'd have to ride over to Los Angeles to find somebody...

Pat M. Yeah, and you almost felt like, "Am I the only gay person in my city or the only gay person on my block?" And then when you realize, oh well hey we know somebody over here over there, blah blah blah. It's a real eye-opener for those folks back then. And it was for me, when I first came to Dignity. When I first came to Joe and said, "Well, I don't know anybody who's gay and Catholic in San Diego." And he said, "Don't worry, we'll take care of that, we do," because they'd heard from them. So, yeah. It's amazing. Because the only outlet back then for people to meet and socialize were gay bars, that was it, that was your

only choice. Now look at the choices people have in the gay community: you've got all kinds of organizations to join, you've got GLBT centers in cities across the country – I mean, your choices are unlimited now about where you can get together and meet socially.

Heather W. Gay bowling league...

Pat M. Yeah, yeah. The whole bit. And people don't feel as isolated as they did anymore. The times have changed. Even, I think – well, we can see it. The mores have changed, peoples attitudes have changed. It's so typical – the Church is always in a catch-up mode [laughing]. Society seems to be one step ahead of the church, regardless of what church it is, ironically.

Heather W. I'm going to ask what may seem like an obvious – I'm interested in how, the idea of starting chapters – it seems like an obvious decision, now that there's Dignity chapters all over, but I do wonder when Dignity was deciding how to organize itself in the beginning, why chapters, you know?

Pat M. Yeah. That's a good question. I remember that back in the early 70's in Los Angeles they were dealing with that specific issue, about how to structure the organization. And so what ended up happening was they actually, the people in Los Angeles had the wits about them to create a structure within Dignity whose sole purpose was to look at ways to facilitate Dignity around the country. And – I'm trying to remember – I think the name of that group was The Associated...oh, gosh, I can't remember now, again I'd have to look it up in my records. But it had a specific name, and Pat Allen –

Heather W. I'll be talking to him, actually.

Pat M. Well, Pat Allen was a major figure in that, in the beginning. He's no longer part of Dignity.

Heather W. Yeah.

Pat M. Okay. But he played a major role in helping to create the structure for facilitating Dignity around the country, and it became one of his responsibilities to travel around the country and meet with people in various communities to help them get off the ground and start gathering as a collective group. And it was just a matter of time, really, to create the structure that we have today, which has gone through numerous changes over the years. We were at one point – for the time it was right – we were very structured, and we had chapters, we had regions, we had coordinators, it was just quite large, and a big network. But over a period of time we saw the need to streamline the organization. And to give the national structure more flexibility in order to deal with national issues and move quickly. The older structure of the organization was a bit unwieldy; it was more time consuming, involved more volunteers, more elections, etc. And so we went to the streamlined method, so that chapters were free to go about their business locally and then the national structure could move forward on a national scope and deal with national issues. So that's where we're at now. But, yeah, I mean chapters were just – I mean, at one point in time, as I recall, we had 88 chapters around the country, and Canada. That's another interesting aspect – at one point in time in Dignity's history we considered ourselves an international organization. In fact, we would refer to ourselves as “Dignity International” for a period of time. And the largest contingency outside the United States was in Canada, and they used to have probably two or three times the number of chapters that they do now, and they were part of the same organization. And then it was consciously decided that Dignity chapters felt that the time had been right for them to create their own national organization, so they became Dignity Canada, with a separate structure, separate governing board, the whole bit. Dignity actually transformed in Australia into the organization that's now known as Acceptance. Same type of organization as ours: same premise, the whole bit; different structure. And then there were similar other GLBT Catholic organizations that cropped up in other countries.

Heather W. Yeah, do you know about Mexico?

Pat M. Well...no...yes, and no.

Heather W. [laughing] Of course you know about Mexico.

Pat M. To the best of my knowledge there is no coordinated effort in Mexico.

Heather W. Okay, there were a number of letters in there, from not only Mexico but other parts of Latin America.

Pat M. Yes, yes there were. And I've dealt with some of those correspondences. Philippines, also. I personally have always felt that it would be wonderful if we had the resources to literally help establish Dignity organizations in other countries. I think it would be great, but we don't have the resources, unfortunately. And some of the countries did attempt to create – they saw what was going on in the United States, and I think a lot of the foreign countries were trying to pattern themselves after what we did here, but for one reason or another they didn't succeed. The one exception, besides Australia, would be Great Britain. They continue to function over there. There was also an organization in New Zealand; they had a few chapters over there at one time. That has since, I think, entirely disappeared. Philippines has expressed an interest in the past; I don't think they ever got off the ground – I'm not sure. I do know that there are, in lieu of Catholic gay and lesbian organizations, there are certain ecumenical GLBT organizations in some countries, I do know that. And we have had for many years in DignityUSA an international liaison, and his name is Scotty. And Scotty if I'm not mistaken lives in Philadelphia, I'm pretty sure. And Scotty has for many years just been an international liaison. It hasn't gone anywhere, but he stays in touch with some of the other countries.

Heather W. Have there ever been other language groups, especially Spanish language groups?

Pat M. Not really, no there haven't. Again, it's lack of resources. We've, in recent years, paid more attention to the Hispanic segment of our population in Dignity, and so we're gradually developing more Spanish articles, there's a Spanish section on the DignityUSA site for example. But we have a lot of room to grow in that regard, definitely – especially in a community like San Diego for example where we have a tremendous number of Hispanics, and we're so close to the border, it's always been in the back of our mind that we need to do more, it's just a question of, well how do we do it? So we keep struggling with that. And then, the women – the women.

Heather W. Yeah.

Pat M. It's a double whammy, for women. I mean, traditionally in the Catholic Church not only are women in general treated as – and of course the conservatives will disagree with this – as second class citizens, but if you're gay and lesbian that's even worse. So naturally if you happen to be a woman and you're lesbian, what's the likelihood that you're going to be interested in participating in a church that puts you down twice? [laughing] For your sex and your sexuality, hello! So again, the women who do get involved in Dignity are pretty remarkable and pretty strong women. They just have a very strong character and they don't let their Catholic tradition put them down. And, you know, more power. We've had women locally in San Diego who have become chapter presidents and were very effective. In fact, it's interesting to note, and not surprisingly, that every time you have a chapter that has a woman as a president you have more women involved.

Heather W. That's the pattern across the board. The MCC, the gay temple...

Pat M. Yup, that's the pattern. And that's why I always welcome more women in leadership roles, because it helps draw in more women into the organization. Which has been a real learning experience, I might add, for the men in the organization. As I mentioned earlier, like any other segment of the population, you have liberal and conservative thinkers among gay men. And for the

conservative gay men it has been a real struggle recognizing the equality of lesbian women. I mean it's amazing the struggle for them, but you know, it's just the reality based on their own personal upbringing, et cetera. And that's made it even more challenging for some chapters to deal with the issue, their attitudes, their attitudes...

Heather W. Do you remember any point where there were particular conflicts, especially in the early –

Pat M. Oh yes, oh very much so – in fact, vividly, I remember – this has really been a very interesting dynamic, again, in the structure of the organization. Which again I think is a good testament to the organization's resilience that we dealt with quote "hard difficult controversial issues," one being the involvement of women, and in the early stages of Dignity, which was primarily all men, when we first met as a national body in convention in 1973 in Hollywood we took that issue head-on and it was very difficult for some people to deal with. I recall that San Diego and San Francisco, in particular, were very adamant about requiring women to hold a co-chair position in the chapters. So basically what we were saying, which was similar to what was going on in the civil rights movement, we were saying that because of the situation we needed to legislate that there needed to be a male and female co-chair. A lot of chapters disagreed with that. They felt that, no, you can't legislate something like that, it should just come naturally. And, of course, those of us maintained, it's not going to come naturally, you have to force the issue to make it happen. And so San Francisco and San Diego, in particular, had that attitude; Los Angeles did not take that approach. So at the convention – which I can't remember the exact number of chapters we had in 1973, it was a small number in '73 that met – but I remember we were all seated around the table, a long table, and were discussing these issues, and it was heart-wrenching.

But we even did, in fact we have it today, it is in our national structure that you have to involve women in the national level to a great extent. At one time nationally, if I remember correctly, we required that women served at a national

level – I'm trying to remember now; I'm having a little difficulty – we required women to be involved at the national level at least every other term, that type of thing, so that we continued to have that balance and that the organization wouldn't continue to lean towards an all-male attitude. So..and in some chapters, like back east, there's a lot of women involved – Philadelphia has a lot of women involved in the chapter, Boston has a lot of women involved in their chapter, for example. Those are two that come to mind right away, but most of the chapters are very male-oriented, yeah.

Heather W. And I would guess that – so, the convention in 1973, did the decision – was the decision [laughter] – sorry, is that where they decided that there must be co-chairs, male and female?

Pat M. Yeah, back then.

Heather W. And those – I would imagine that the chapters that were against that probably also had some deep resentments?

Pat M Well, yeah we didn't – we actually didn't legislate it for all the chapters –

Heather W. Oh, okay...

Pat M. We just urged the chapters, as I recall, we just urged the chapters to do everything they possibly could to get women in leadership roles, and it just wasn't possible for some chapters –

Heather W. 'Cause there weren't any.

Pat M. Yeah, because they couldn't deal with it, they didn't want to deal with it, or it was hard to find women who would get involved. So. Yeah, it's always been a struggle; it continues to be a struggle today. So it's still primarily a male organization. At the national level currently we have a male president, a female

vice president, and that's correct – the national structure does have a male and female. If it's a female president, then it's a male vice president or vice versa. So we've been maintaining that approach for many years which has really helped, I think personally. A lot of people say "Well you just can't continue to force that," but it's worked. Quite frankly, it's worked, because it helps show that Dignity is definitely very much a male and female organization...and you know we want women involved. We even had what we called a Committee for Women's Concerns, which is basically kind of disappeared for all intents and purposes, but for a while it was a very strong element within the organization for the sole purpose of getting more women involved in Dignity who had their own concerns separate from men's issues. And so it was effective.

Heather W. One of the other issues I've seen talked about is at the local level the question of who can perform liturgies...

Pat M. Yeah, right. That's very true. That's another interesting dynamic, and one that I am sure causes no end of consternation for the official church, because we have taken the approach in Dignity that each chapter can determine how they want to structure their chapter and how they want to celebrate, how they want to worship. In some cases they might not even have Mass, for whatever reasons – they might not have a priest available, whatever. But it's Dignity's position to leave that up to the chapter, the make-up of the chapter to decide. Male, female presider; Catholic, even a non-Catholic. It does vary.

Heather W. How long has that been the case?

Pat M. Oh, a long time. For several years. I don't think – I'm pretty sure Dignity nationally has never legislated that you had to have a specifically ordained Roman Catholic priest preside at your services. We have dealt with the issue of whether or not Dignity is a Roman Catholic organization, and it was decided that we do see ourselves as a Roman Catholic organization which is all-inclusive. Meaning: if you're not a Roman Catholic – let's say you come from the Old Catholic

tradition, or the American Catholic church, whatever – you’re more than welcome to participate, be a member of Dignity. And if you are so inclined in your chapter and you want to have a presider who is not a Roman Catholic priest – maybe you can’t find one in your diocese – it’s up to you. We don’t tell them. We do have a policy, a national policy, that no convicted sexual abuser can be a presider. That is a national policy, and that has caused some problems for some chapters because they’ve had to deal with that. But we had to go on record and say that – so we have the same zero-tolerance position that the bishops do, that if you are a convicted sexual abuser you may not preside at mass. You’re more than welcome to be a member, you can participate, but you can’t preside. Closed issue. But yeah, in some chapters we have women who preside at worship services, which I think is great – it’s another testament to the flexibility of the organization; we’re not so caught up in you know “have you been ordained?” or “you’ve gotta be a male,” this kind of stuff. But it varies from chapter to chapter, it really does. Like I don’t know if, for example, if the LA chapter could deal with a female presider, I don’t know.

[End audio file 2]

[Begin audio file 3]

Heather W. Well, I was going to say, Dignity has kind of served as a model for other gay groups that have mobilized within denominations –

Pat M. Well, I’d like to think so.

Heather W. I’m thinking particularly of Integrity.

Pat M. Yeah, I suppose that would be true. Yeah, I suppose that would be true. I haven’t seen – well, maybe it was just because I was out of touch for several years in Dignity, because I went on a hiatus for a while – I don’t specifically know if we’ve had a direct influence, but maybe we have. It makes sense, what you say,

because Dignity was one of the very first religious GLBT organizations to form. I do know for a fact, this is an interesting aspect of the history, when the San Diego chapter was in formation we, in the very early 1970's, sought a 501(c)3 status from the federal government, and I remember specifically what an incredible experience that was, because it had never been done before. And when we as a GLBT religious group sought that particular status from the federal government they didn't know what to do with it. They really did not know what to do with it. They freaked out. And I can tell you that because we've got the documentation. The correspondence was phenomenal. We had one individual here in San Diego who fortunately was just perfect for this, he had the mind for it. He made it his particular personal project to get that status for us, and we also sought some legal advice from lawyers, et cetera. And we had correspondence going back and forth with the federal government for several months – I think it was almost a year before they finally granted us the 501(c)3 , and when they did that established us as one of the first GLBT religious organizations in the country to have that status, and when word got out about that other organizations actually sought us out for advice including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Heather W. Wow.

Pat M. So they came to us – I have the correspondence in my files – from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington D.C., sending us a letter asking us how did we do it. So that was pretty significant.

Heather W. So was that the San Diego chapter?

Pat M. Just the San Diego chapter, yeah.

Heather W. Did the LA chapter at that point have 501(c)3?

Pat M. Nope. Nope. Yeah, yeah, yeah – it was amazing. And then it became easier, since we had already established this it became easier because then the federal

government started getting more requests from other gay organizations – because at that time, as crazy as it seems today, back then even the federal government was looking at the GLBT community with suspicion.

Heather W. Oh yeah.

Pat M. You know, were we some kind of an underground movement with nefarious intentions, you know that kind of stuff. So it was an interesting experience, yeah. But yeah, as a model – yeah, I suppose that would be very true. A lot of other organizations did follow suit after Dignity, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Methodists, yeah. It's amazing when you stop to look at it now and you see all these different denominations that have within them officially or unofficially some form of GLBT religious support organization. Even the Mormons.

Heather W. Oh yeah, Jehovah's Witnesses.

Pat M. Yeah, it's amazing, absolutely amazing. So, yeah. One of the things that I know Dignity is looking towards doing locally – and we've done it off and on over the years – we'd like to create some kind of a coalition where we're working more closely with other GLBT religious organizations in town, such as Integrity. The difference between Integrity and Dignity is that Integrity is much more welcome in their denomination that we are as an organization. In fact, locally, the Integrity organization is on the diocesan website. I don't think you're going to see that anytime soon for Dignity on the Catholic diocesan website. Again though, another interesting piece of history – where I had mentioned that Dignity had actually caught the church somewhat off-guard because we were fulfilling a need that the hierarchy wasn't addressing, what was a real clear indication of that was that in 1979 -- when Dignity held its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary national convention in San Diego – the front page, the entire front page of the diocesan Catholic newspaper carried an entire article on Dignity. It was very positive with a huge photograph on the front cover. Never happened since, but that one time we were actually on the front cover of the diocesan newspaper: “Dignity Meets in San Diego.” It was just

amazing, yeah, so...and that of course, when that happened, well, every parish in the diocese got that newspaper. And that's when all the priests started coming out of the woodwork like crazy – if they didn't know about Dignity before then they knew about Dignity then.

Heather W. Oh wow.

Pat M. And it's like "Whoa! There's this organization, oh my God I gotta get in touch with those people."

Heather W. Is that when you had forty priests?

Pat M. Yeah, it was amazing, absolutely amazing, yeah. And we met at the U.S. Grant Hotel here in San Diego, it's a historic hotel here in downtown San Diego. We had 600 people at that convention. So yeah, that was a big deal. And...so we continue to move on. We eventually over time, of course, Dignity established a permanent national office in Washington D.C. which has been there now for over 20 years. And at one point in time we finally made the conscious decision to hire a national executive director and now we have a paid staff, and then the board of directors continues to be strictly volunteer. And under my watch as national vice-president, we began the process – Mary Louise Cervone was my national president, I was her vice president – we began the process of restructuring Dignity from the very large structure that it was, which was becoming unwieldy, with a house of representatives. That's when we started streamlining the organization – it was a two-year process of looking at how to restructure Dignity and then we finished it so now we're at a point where we have a national board of directors that's elected by the entire organization and that's how we function today.

Heather W. So, well one thing that's also interesting to me as Dignity and other similar groups have gotten the resources to be able to institutionalize a little more, and have so what used to be committees – like social action or spirituality, I don't remember, liturgy maybe – so all these different functions that Dignity does on

the national level also in some way become part of the, what I'll call it job description, or part of the responsibility also of the national office. It's interesting to look at that kind of evolution...

Pat M. Yeah, that dynamic...

Heather W. ...of function.

Pat M. Yeah. The attempt to create viable national committees has been very challenging, very challenging for the organization. Voluntarism – because of the demands placed on volunteers it is really really hard to get a functioning committee. We have a handful of functioning committees right now, but you're right – what has ended up happening as the directors on the national board, we continually refer to our national board as “working directors,” meaning that not only do they determine policy for the organization, but they also have to carry out some of that policy to the extent that they're able. So we've got certain built-in limitations as to how much we can accomplish based on the demands of volunteerism. So that continues to be a real challenge, and even getting volunteers to serve on the national board is a challenge, because they know how demanding it is. You have to pay your own way, and when you commit to being on the national board you are committing several hours of your time every week to make phone calls, write letters, create reports, literally work on the dynamics of, “Okay, what do we want to do next? How do we want to accomplish it?” So it's very demanding. Yeah.

Heather W. I'm particularly interested in the relationships and tensions between Dignity's role in creating community on a local level, you know, between people who are seeking others like them with involvement in the larger gay and lesbian community, and especially the politicizations that happens sometimes with that and advocacy within the church – because a lot of times those roles can be in conflict with each other.

Pat M. Yeah, advocacy, that's a real challenge, advocacy is, on the local level. A lot of the chapters have pretty much taken the attitude that advocacy should be a national issue and locally they're more pastoral. That will vary from chapter to chapter, and from time to time, depending upon the leadership. There's some of us who would like to see more advocacy, there are others who would like to see more pastoral – so you've got that constant tension about which, where do we pool our resources, where do we divide our attention. You know, again it just is strictly based on the makeup of the local group. If the sentiment in the local group is not to participate politically or get involved to advocate issues, et cetera, then it ain't going to happen. I mean, you can try and it's just not going to happen. Locally, you know we're trying to chart a new course for the chapter with the new leadership we've got, and again, it's all volunteers. But when we come together each month for our board meetings, we're trying to figure out ways to get people more involved, try to figure out what issues we can get people interested in besides getting together every week for Mass and to socialize. And we did come to the conclusion that one of the best ways to do that – locally and nationally – is get more people involved. Because the more people you get involved in what you're doing, then the greater your resource for getting people to do things; and if you've got a limited number of people to work with then you're going to have a built-in restriction. So we're looking at ways to get more people involved in Dignity, locally. We're starting a campaign where we're going to go on to the campuses and start going after some of the students and see where that goes, so we'll try that approach. But yeah, there is that constant tension.

Heather W. And I'm interested, in particular, in the very first years, especially the early 70's, would it be fair to say that the community aspect was the most important at that point?

Pat M. Yes, it would be very fair to say. In the early stages of Dignity the primary focus of attention was to create a situation where people could gather locally, so that they could give each other mutual support. That was the primary goal of Dignity at that time. What ended up happening, that as the chapters started to form and

create a life of their own and then the political arena started to change, that's when Dignity started to get more involved in the political arena, as well as the legislative arena, if you will, within the Catholic Church, because when the Catholic Church itself started to deal with the issues of homosexuality on a more vocal level Dignity was the obvious organization that had to step up to the plate.

Heather W. Right.

Pat M. And so then Dignity started to take on some of these issues within the Catholic Church, as well as within the state. And so we went through a transition.

Heather W. When do you remember that happening? What legislative acts do you remember being key for that?

Pat M. I would say, again, that probably Dignity was compelled in that direction at least by 1987 when Ratzinger came out with that letter – that was the impetus that started to move Dignity in the direction of advocacy because we were put in a position where we had to make a very serious decision and that led us into the direction of, “Okay, now you've forced us to make a decision.” And then we started to get more involved in such issues – I mean when things came up on ballots in states, and so forth, then Dignity would get involved. And we'll sign on, continuing today, we'll sign on to amicus briefs and so on and so forth, as an organization, so we get involved quite a bit. But I think it was in the 1980's when the transition started to move away from concentrating on building communities and becoming more of an advocacy group.

Heather W. At that point there wasn't much to lose...

Pat M. Right, yeah, at the point no, really, there really wasn't. You know, hey, we made our decision, so yeah. But yeah, I mean, we lost a lot of chapters. They just couldn't handle it, you know, because it's an all-volunteer organization, if the leadership of a group decides that they don't want to deal with it any more or they

want to move on or whatever or they get angry then the group's gonna fold. We've had a lot of chapters just in the state of California, for example, come and go over the years. And some just hang in there: San Diego is one example, L.A. is another, San Francisco, Seattle.

Heather W. Oh, Seattle folded?

Pat M. No, oh no – Seattle didn't fold, no – all these chapters are still going, yeah.

Heather W. Seattle was a very strong one, I remember...

Pat M. Oh yeah, it was a very strong chapter. It's still a strong chapter. It went through a major upset just a few years ago, recently, because they were one of the remaining chapters that was still meeting on Catholic Church facilities, one of the very few that was still meeting in a Catholic Church, and they were finally put in a position where they had to make a decision locally to compromise their position, and so the group split, it literally split. There was one group within the chapter that decided to stay with the parish, and the other segment of the group said, "No, not if we have to deny ourselves as Dignity." So they are now meeting in a Protestant church like a lot of the other chapters do, and so Dignity continues. In fact, the national secretary is from the Seattle chapter, the current national secretary, Paula Lavalley. That's another part of the dynamics, and now we've got a whole new thing that's coming up with the gay priests and the seminaries. I don't know where that's going to go but that's going to be a very hot issue. And scapegoating gay priests, that was an issue we had to deal with starting in I think it was the year 2000 in Dallas at the bishops' meeting. And then we continued to deal with it at subsequent bishops' meetings. Dignity has made a very visible and vocal presence at the bishops' conferences when they meet. We'll be there sometimes on the floor, buttonholing bishops in the lobby and making statements out in front of the hotels, that sort of stuff. One organization that we have worked with on occasion, that you've probably heard of, is Soul Force...

Heather W. Oh yeah. Mel White.

Pat M. Mel White, right. Mel White's become a very good personal friend of mine. I dearly love the man, and we got to know each other early on, and we continue to correspond. And I always advocated that Dignity should get more involved in that type of thing to some degree. Again, there's always that element, that tension within an organization about how far do you go with your advocacy, you know. How effective can you be, is a question that I hear, when you are protesting on the streets and you're carrying signs and stuff – how effective is that? So, you know, I think there's room for all of it. Again, it's where your own personal interests lie – I'm personally not a protester. I think protesting definitely has its element, and I have definitely protested on occasion. But I'm not so sure that's the most effective method. I think the most effective method is through education. You know, you sit down with people on one on one basis and you talk, you know. You might be talking with someone who holds a completely opposite view of yours, but you've got to talk. And that's how minds get changed, through education. That's one thing that Dignity has done over the years, we've published certain periodicals which have been very helpful. Our most recent periodical that we published was a pamphlet to help Catholic survivors of sexual abuse, a great publication – and we've had other publications in the past as well. And we've got national newsletters and so on and so forth – you've probably seen copies of some of that stuff.

Heather W. Yeah. Another – I'm going to change the subject – because another strain within a number of other groups has been a question of union ceremonies, covenant ceremonies – do you remember, I'm sure Dignity has since performed hundreds...

Pat M. Yes.

Heather W. ...thousands, even, but do you remember when that first became a question in your chapter of Dignity?

Pat M.

I would say – my recollection is that it's never been an issue for Dignity. Dignity has always advocated the sacredness of relationships and as far back as I can remember Dignity has performed union ceremonies, blessings of couples, that type of thing – in fact, over the years we got to a point where we actually created a whole group for couples: a couples ministry within Dignity, to encourage couples in their relationships and to not just bless their relationships but to also recognize the significance of their relationship and their long-term commitment to one another. And so we even created a registry, so that people who go through a formal ceremony within Dignity end up on our registry, so that we have this list of couples over the years who have celebrated their relationship. Then Dignity got to a point in 2003 in Las Vegas where we as a convention formally went on record with a statement that advocated for gay marriage. So we're now on record as fully in favor of gay marriage – civil gay marriage. We already recognized holy unions within Dignity, even though the Catholic Church doesn't recognize holy unions.

And again, historically if you read the history of the Catholic Church you will see that gay relationships have been blessed throughout the centuries by priests and even bishops. So, I mean there is that historic background there, which is why I find it so intriguing that today the hierarchy is so adamant about opposing or denying what history has shown. You know, what's your problem? What's the resistance, you know, you have to ask yourself that question – me thinks thou doth protest too much, why do you protest so much? What's the problem? So, you know I just...and there's a lot of answers to that question. But yeah, holy unions, as far back as I can remember.

We think that locally the first recognition of a blessed relationship was in 1973, yes 1973 when a lesbian couple was blessed by one of our chaplains, a Jesuit in fact. Father Bernie Cassady, I remember the name. I remember the couple, Martha and Angie, and they were blessed as a couple, so that was in 1973. But yeah, that's another deal, yeah, unions. So yeah, and on our website, on our national website there's a whole section there for couples, couples ministry. We developed all kinds of help aids for chapters to celebrate relationships, couples relationships.

We've got ceremonies, examples of ceremonies – some really beautiful, creative stuff, really nice stuff. And in fact at the convention in Las Vegas we had and we publicized in the news a ceremony where we had lots of couples at the convention exchange vows. It was really a beautiful, beautiful ceremony. Yeah, it was terrific. Gay and lesbian couples, yeah it was great. It's been a really interesting road. When I got involved in Dignity back in 1972 little did I know, and I never really gave it any thought at the time, that I was a pioneer. I look back on it now and I say, hey that's pretty cool, I was a pioneer, I was involved towards the beginning, not long after Stonewall in New York, and all that stuff. But at the time I didn't give it that much thought – I just thought, "Hey this is cool. There's really an organization I can belong to, I think I'm going to get involved," and I got excited about it. I really just thought, "Wow this is great!" But I never thought about being someone who was at the forefront who was helping start something that was going to become bigger than I even knew. Because in San Diego, when we started the San Diego chapter, there was only like ten chapters at the time. We were one of the first ten. So yeah, that was pretty exciting.

I did do – I don't remember the specific year, but it was in the '70's – I was interviewed by a local writer here in town, local reporter, and she – I don't know how she found out about me; I don't recall – but she heard about me, she heard about Dignity, and so she contacted me, did a major interview, and I didn't realize at the time because I was very young, didn't think of the consequences, which is probably good...you know, we had this incredible interview in my apartment and that was back at a time when a lot of people, most people, didn't even use their own name because they were afraid of what was going to happen to them at work, in relationships, et cetera. I was pretty brazen – I used my own name, I wasn't afraid to be out, outspoken, because when I came out of the closet I threw the doors open, boy did I. But I didn't think of the consequences, and there were consequences. My name and my picture and the article appeared in three newspapers locally. Tens of thousands of people were reading this. I was probably one of the very first openly gay people to appear in the press locally, and I didn't even think of it. Well, what ended up happening – and you need to know this –

what ended up happening was my ex-wife at the time received negative feedback, my parents received negative feedback. I, however, didn't receive any negative feedback! I was expecting hate mail for God's sake. I was expecting people to call me up on the phone and tell me what a jackass I was or what a bad person I am or how evil I was or I was going to go to hell – I didn't get any of that! It blew me away. I thought, "What the heck is this?" Instead, the people that I loved and were close to me – they got the negative feedback. And what was really tough was – and God love him – my dad had a real hard time dealing with my own homosexuality, and understandably. I mean, given his background I could fully understand that – I didn't have a hard time with that, I never did. I always *wanted* him to be able to embrace it and just, "Oh what the hell you're gay so what!" but I knew it was hard for him to do that. And so...he had a prominent position here in a government job, and he got some negative feedback at work. And I thought, "Oh Lord I'm not – I didn't even have the presence to tell my mom and dad ahead of time 'and by the way, I'm going to be in the newspaper.'" So everything came as a surprise, you know, and so my mom was the one who broke it to me – she says, "You know your dad..." So I felt bad, but he didn't say anything. He just kinda let it ride, kinda wished I hadn't been so public, you know, that kind of stuff. And so things just kind of blew over after a while – like anything else that became history. But there were letters that did come into the paper, you know, for a while afterwards. But it sure did create a whole new, you know, I mean it opened up the doors again for a lot of people. So obviously the good thing that came of that was that people saw, "Oh, okay, there's this organization called Dignity and..." so more people became involved. Yeah, that's what it's all about.

Heather W. It does seem that publicity tends to always – even negative publicity – tends to work in our favor...

Pat M. You know, interestingly you should say that. I have always felt that way too. I always get the – my temptation is, any publicity is better than no publicity even if it's negative publicity. In fact what ended up happening just last week – we had a surprise reporter show up at one of our Masses, and you know, it was devious on

his part, and I think he probably realized that that wasn't the right way to do it. But he ended up coming to our Mass on the premise that he was just an interested person in Dignity. Well, after Mass was over and we were in parish hall, that's when he said to me, "Oh, by the way, I'm a reporter with the Reader news magazine." So at that point I thought to myself, "Oh okay, fine, you're a reporter, you're young, and you're going to do an article on us – great, go for it. Even if it's bad publicity, it's publicity." [laughter] And it turned out to be a very good article. It wasn't totally accurate, but it wasn't negative. And I thought, well, there you go, some free publicity. A few people kind of got shook up at first and said, "What are you doing with an article in the Reader news mag – don't you know that's a homophobic news magazine?! Blah blah blah..." And I knew all this background already, and I thought, you know – my reaction was, "Chill out, chill out, you know, it's free publicity!" [laughter] What's the big deal?

Heather W. I guess the main anxiety with publicity is that people who don't want their names to be mentioned...

Pat M. Right, exactly. Fortunately that wasn't a problem in this case. Otherwise they would have been held for libel or something, I'm sure. There were – I don't know if he came clean with the other people that he interviewed – well, he interviewed one of the priests, and his picture is actually in the article. And Tom was fine with it, that didn't become a problem, but I made sure that Tom knew that this guy was a reporter once I knew. But then this kid went and interviewed two or three other people that evening, and again I don't know if he told them in advance – I assume that he did – that he was a reporter. Yeah, and their names were used in the article too, but again, not a problem. And I'm pretty sure he did not use – in fact, in their case he did not use last names, just first names, so.

See, that was another issue – another interesting part of the segment, the history, the dynamics of an organization like Dignity, a GLBT-religious organization, was anonymity. Anonymity was extremely important initially, because people were so fearful of what would happen, and that became less of an issue as time went on,

and now it's almost a non-issue for most people – being anonymous. But it was a real issue for several years in the early stages of Dignity. I mean even the national president didn't use his own name – Joe Gilgamesh – for years I didn't even know his last name was Killian, and then when I finally found out Killian I said, “Well why in the world do you call yourself Gilgamesh?” and then, of course, he explained why – because it was something from the Bible and all that sort of stuff. But I had always used my own name, but a lot of the people I was associated with used pseudonyms because they didn't want recriminations or problems with work or friends.

Heather W. Now when you first got involved were they still using the application form?

Pat M. Yes, yeah we were still using the application form, and we were still pretty – what's the word I'm looking for – very careful. We were careful for two reasons: we were careful to protect the people who were interested in us and we were protecting us from negative people, from people who might have the sole intent on destroying what we were doing. So we were very, very cautious early on, very cautious, yeah. We, you know, asked things like your age, what's your specific interest – stuff like that. So yeah, we were very careful initially. And, of course, at some point in time, when you become publicly known, there's only so much you can do. And there were instances I remember, well I know this happened across the country – there were instances when we actually had people who would protest because they were so incensed by what we were doing they would actually protest us. You know, like protestors show up at the parades every year around the country – well we had some protestors come to some of our functions. And in particular, I recall, for a while we would have the Blue Army, which is a ultra-conservative Catholic organization, The Blue Army of Mary. And they would come in – this is an amazing period of our history – these ladies, these elderly ladies would come in to our Mass, rosary beads in hand, kneel down in the back of our chapel, and pray the rosary out loud during Mass. [laughter] We just ignored them. Eventually they went away. [laughter] But that was part of our history, yeah.

Heather W. Did the San Diego chapter ever – well, the chapter I’m most familiar with, that had kind of an activist presence is the New York chapter, St. Patrick’s Cathedral – that seems to be somewhat exceptional, or is that not the case? Did San Diego ever have a relationship like that with the local parishes?

Pat M. It is exceptional, but there have been a few instances around the country where the chapters would get visibly and vocally involved in the press over particular issues, including San Diego. I can’t specifically remember just now, but I do know that in the past we did. We would make appearances in front of the cathedral, St. Joseph’s and so forth. One of the things that I recall vividly that we got involved in was the Briggs Initiative here in California, which was a major initiative on the state ballot to basically eliminate gay teachers from the school system. And Dignity got extremely involved in that. I think that was probably one of the biggest grassroots political involvement the organization may have ever been involved in, and it was a huge success. We created a separate political organization within Dignity to protect our 501(c)3 status – so we had, a separate organization had to be created to comply with law and that organization of gay and lesbian Catholics, that was their sole purpose was to get politically involved and to get the word out to vote “no” on this initiative. And up and down the state we got very involved, and we beat the initiative. So that was a major success. Still have the buttons – we had buttons made up, the whole bit. My archives are quite extensive – that’s just one box. I’ve got *lots* of archives. I’ve got every single national publication that Dignity’s put out, all the way from the very beginning, from the first edition. I have all of the local newsletters, lots of stuff. Correspondence, lots of correspondence. Documents, I have documents. [sigh] Maybe someday I’ll get it all catalogued. [laughter] Why don’t we go to lunch? It’s noon, just past noon.