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**Title**

Rev. Robert Mary Clement Oral History Interview and Transcript

**Date**

August 18, 2007

**Extant**

3 hours 54 minutes interview (two files) and 1 transcript

**Abstract**

Reverend Robert M. Clement discusses his ordination and ministry as priest and later bishop in various churches within the Old Catholic tradition. He started the openly gay Church of the Beloved Disciple in New York City eventually performing the first "Holy Unions" there. He became a public figure after marching in a priest's collar in the first Gay Pride parade.

**Biographical**

The Most Reverend Robert Mary Clement, Archbishop of North America of the original American Catholic Church and the original Eucharistic Catholic Church; founder of The Church of the Beloved Disciple in Manhattan (1968-1986), the first major urban apostolic and sacramental work for the LGBT community in New York; and the co-creator of the term "Holy Union" who celebrated the first "Holy Union" at the Church of the Beloved Disciple in July, 1970.

Robert Clement was born on March 12, 1925 in Lee Park, Pennsylvania, of Roman Catholic and Episcopalian parents. In college he became aware of the Old Catholic movement and felt comfortable with it as a way to study and prepare for the priesthood.

Archbishop William Henry Francis Brothers ordained him as a priest in the Old Catholic Church of America on August 8, 1948. As a result of intercommunion, two years later he was transferred to The Old Roman Catholic Church under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Richard Arthur Marchenna (1911-1982). For internal reasons he was conditionally re-ordained on November 1, 1950. Clement was a Bishop-Elect under Marchenna in 1958. He was at that time the Vicar General and was elected to be Co-Adjutor to Archbishop Marchenna.

Recognizing a different call within the priesthood, Clement was accepted into The Polish National Catholic Church. Again, in order to regularize the standing of his priesthood, he was conditionally ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Thaddeus F. Zielinski on June 22, 1959 in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. In August 1959, Fr. Clement met his life-companion John Darcy Noble while in London. Their relationship lasted 44 years until Bishop Noble's death on September 21, 2003.

Fr. Clement served as a parish priest in New Jersey and New York City for the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) for approximately ten years. He left the PNCC in 1968 since the PNCC had no interest at that time in a primarily English-speaking parish in New York City.

Consequently Fr. Clement founded an independent work called the American Orthodox Church of the United States (Western Orthodox), based upon an apostolic and sacramental system for which he became the Curial Administrator. This was in response to Fr. Clement's strong desire to do an open and public outreach to the LGBT community. In 1968, Fr. Clement and friends founded the initial work of The Church of the Beloved Disciple which primarily served the New York LGBT community.

After the Stonewall uprising, Fr. Clement heeded its clarion call to action, and in New York City's first Gay Parade, he marched as the only openly-gay priest and in collar carrying the banner "Gay People This Is Your Church," while his life-companion John Darcy Noble passed out fliers inviting people to attend "The Church of the Beloved Disciple." Over 800 people attended the following Mass at the church at 9th Avenue and 28th Street.

In essence, Clement had inherited the work of the 1946 Eucharistic Catholic Church. So much so that, in 1972, Bishop George Hyde legally transferred to Clement the official incorporation papers of the original American Catholic Church (founded by Archbishop Vilatte in 1915). Beloved Disciple now functioned under it as the incorporated American Catholic Church. Two years later, Bishop Hyde also authorized Bishop Clement to continue the mission of the Eucharistic Catholic Church at Beloved Disciple.

The year 1974 was a high mark in Clement's work and life, as Archbishop Richard A. Marchenna consecrated him as a Bishop on October 6, 1974, assisted by Bishop Martin Luther Williams. This event was televised in New York City and received national attention as the first openly gay bishop's consecration. Clement and Noble also coined the term "Holy Union" and Clement was the first to publicly perform Holy Unions in July, 1970. Bishop Clement was a lightning-rod for the news media whenever they wanted a quote concerning the naturalness of gay and lesbian people.

In 1986, Bishops Clement and Noble wanted to retire from the fray of New York, so Fr. Philip Vasianto became the rector of Beloved Disciple in NYC. When Fr. Philip soon thereafter died of AIDS, Bishops Clement & Noble were living in southern California and too far away to return to oversee The Church of the Beloved Disciple.

In California, Bishop Clement made ecumenical relations with other independent Catholic jurisdictions and work, while his personal time was occupied by caring for a gay godson Tim who had AIDS, and in caring for Bishop John who had diabetes. Following said intercommunion on October 24, 1993 Archbishop Marcario Ga, Obispo Maximo of the Philippine Independent Catholic Church recognized Archbishop Clement's ecclesial standing and sub-conditione consecrated him as the regional Bishop of San Diego. Archbishop Ga was assisted by Bishop Robert Halliwell II and Bishop David Riggs at St. Andrew Church in Los Alamitos. After Ga's death, the PICC took a different direction and other fractions assumed all functions.

During the San Diego years, Clement underwent deep introspection and began to reassess his understanding of his calling and service, and the meaning of Jesus' words. His readings expanded to the Jesus Seminars, the Historical Jesus, and he became aware of the historical Celtic Church--within which he found similarities to the philosophies of Buddhism and Sufism. He had an epiphany in realizing that since he had been a leader in LGBT human rights and since many churches now embraced his lead; it was now time to present a new vision of spirituality and the church. Clement saw in the Celtic church that it was free of the Augustinian concepts of sin, guilt and punishment, and how the Celtic church expressed in greater depth many of the spiritual concepts of The Church of the Beloved Disciple.

After Bishop John's death (2003), Archbishop Clement carried the work of the American Catholic Church to Los Angeles. He has been active in intercommunion with numerous independent Catholic parishes; active as a member of the Interfaith LGBT Clergy Association; and established the Archbishop John Darcy Noble Center--a center for spiritual studies where individual spiritual growth is a goal. Clement's interest in the Celtic Church is paramount, as are studies of the Aramaic Jesus, the Historical Jesus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi, and Buddhist and Sufi writings. He has been assisted in his Los Angeles service by Fr. Adrian R. Ravarour, whom he consecrated as a bishop on September 17, 2006, assisted by Archbishop Mark S. Shirilau.

The Most Reverend Robert Mary Clement retired as the Archbishop of the American Catholic Church after being a bishop for 45 years, October 6, 1974-August 25, 2019. He is now 94 years old, and beginning a new phase in his life after a lifetime of serving the LGBTQ community.

### **Scope and Content**

Reverend Robert M. Clement founded the Church of the Beloved Disciple in 1968 for the purpose of ministering to the needs of New York City's gay community. He discusses his movement through numerous branches of Old Catholicism, as well as his experience as a gay priest marching in the first gay pride parade following Stonewall, being ordained the first openly gay bishop, and performing the first "Holy Unions", a term coined with his partner, John Darcy Noble.

This interview was conducted by J. Gordon Melton, the director for the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California, and the author of more than twenty-six books, on American religion.

### **Access**

Open to all researchers.

<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/robert-mary-clement>

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### **Languages**

Collection material is in English

### **Custodial History**

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### **Tags**

Catholic (Eucharistic)

Hyde, George

Noble, John

Church of the Beloved Disciple

Clergy Activist

Gay Liberation Movement

Marriage Equality

Clement, Robert M.

