

## Sister Paula: drag evangelist

*I knew that the people in the church wouldn't accept me if they knew about me, but I knew that God knew.*

BY KAMILA AL-NAJJAR

Television evangelism. Usually these words evoke images of people such as Oral Roberts or Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker preaching the word of God to hundreds of lost souls in a big studio church. Those words mean condemnation of membership in a communist party, of gay lifestyles and of the evil of wearing only one earring.

But a new approach to evangelism is being taken on Portland community-access cable television: A transsexual is helping to spread the word of God with a not-so-typical video approach. Sister Paula, who also works as an entertainer at Darcelle XV and writes a column for the gay newspaper *City Week*, comments on her ministry:

**Sister Paula:** "When I was 12 years old, I was converted and saved in a Baptist church, as the traditional evangels do when you accept Christ as your savior. From that time on, I felt that my calling in life was to do the work of an evangel. I have never questioned that call. I received an experience called the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is what makes the Pentecostal distinctive from other evangelical churches, when I was in high school in 1954.

"All through my growing-up years as a boy I was very effeminate and was made fun of as far back as I can remember. I've always been sexually attracted to men and have always had an awareness that I was different from most other people.

"We are talking about the '50s, when the gay community here in Portland was a couple of bars, and that was it.

"Even though I knew I was attracted to men, I never questioned the religious experience that I had when I was converted in the Baptist church and was filled with the Holy Spirit. My relationship with God was just as real, on a one-on-one basis, as was any relationship with any person; I never questioned it.

"When I was a freshman in high school, there was a lot of talk about Christine Jorgensen, the first person whose sex change was publicized. When I read the stories of how she had grown up, I related to it immediately. For many years I wanted to have a sex change. I never did, and now I am glad I did not.

"In the early '60s I went down to San Francisco with hopes of becoming a female impersonator at Finnochio's. That didn't turn out as I had planned, but I did meet a transsexual who was beginning to live on hormone therapy as a woman. On May 1, 1963, I began living as Paula and took hormone shots and pills. With time, I stopped taking the shots because of the adverse side effects.

"At that time in San Francisco, I joined the Assembly of God in Oakland. That was the first acceptance I got in a heterosexual environment. I prayed, 'God, you can have Paula' and I re-dedicated my life to God. I knew that the people in the church would not accept me if they knew about me, but I knew that God knew. I asked God for a couple of signs that I was doing the right thing. I even prayed at the Assembly of God that if I was living as a woman and if this was wrong, I wanted the people in the church to find out. They never knew.

"As I was growing up and my femininity became more apparent, I became more and more of a disappointment to my father. My relationship with my father, especially in high school, was very estranged and distant. Therefore, I turned to God for fatherly comfort.

According to the traditional churches, Jesus introduced the parent concept of God. Of course, Jesus was talking in the vernacular of the culture in which he lived. Things like inclusive language and the mother-concept of God weren't an issue then.

"I believe God is all things to all people.



Paula Nielsen

Degendering is not a problem for me. I see God as the loving parent; I feel that people can see God as a father image or as a mother image — whatever works for them.

"I was taught that heaven is the place you will go to when you die — if you have accepted Christ as your savior. I grew up with that. Hell — the Lake of Fire — was the place where bad people went, I was traditionally taught. However, God is infinite and you cannot define the infinite totally on a finite level.

"I do not believe that any finite system of religious teaching has all the truth. All teachings have truth in them. The error of fundamentalism is when they say 'this is the truth' and that other systems of teaching or interpretations of Scriptures or beliefs are in error.

"I believe the Bible was written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I do not believe, however, that it was the only book written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

"You can take Scriptures and make the Bible mean almost anything you want to — as in the prophecies, for example, in Revelation. There are many different interpretations of what the symbols mean and what the prophecies are.

"On television I am saying what has worked for me, but if something different works for you, that's wonderful.

"I believe that God loves all people and that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality in his teaching. I know from my own experience that God accepts me for exactly what I am. God looks beyond all of these external things and accepts me for the person I really am inside. I believe this is true of all gay people.

"I am trying to reach church people. There are some who are narrow-minded and bigoted. But there are also some people in the evangelical churches who are loving people, who can be won over. I am also trying to reach gays and lesbians who are afraid to come out — to give them the message that God loves them and that it is OK to be Christian and gay.

"I do not have any aspirations to build a church or a following; I just want to get the message out. Television is another step in fulfilling my calling of getting the word out. The Holy Spirit will draw the people in.

"I may not live to see the kind of world I would like to live in during this lifetime, but I hope by the grace of God that future generations, because of my efforts, will not have to go through the hassles I grew up with.

"Jesus said, 'The first two commandments are 'Thou shalt love the Lord with all thy heart, all thy soul and all thy mind' and 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' Jesus said that if you fulfill these two commandments, you have already fulfilled all of the law and the prophets.

"The bottom line is that if Christians would learn to practice what Jesus taught . . . to love our neighbors as ourselves — prejudice and wars and all of the negative things in the world would dissolve."

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