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Just news

ACT UP stops mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral

"The church brings it down on its own head. It's like a fascist state. You cannot claim divine right when you abuse people the way the Catholic church does."

— Robert Pusillo
President, Dignity/New York

BY REX WOCKNER

The most radical segment of the gay/lesbian movement and the most powerful sect of Christianity clashed December 10 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

It was a conflict that many observers were surprised hadn't happened sooner, given the increasing strength of the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) and the increasingly anti-gay posture of the Roman Catholic Church.

ACT UP was joined in the demonstration by WHAM!, Women's Health Action and Mobilization, a group fighting to keep abortion legal.

The irreverent protest took place both inside and outside the massive gothic cathedral, during a solemn Pontifical mass celebrated by New York's John Cardinal O'Connor.

As some 2,000 demonstrators (police said 4,500) circled outside, chanting "They say don't fuck, we say fuck you," about 100 militants inside brought services to a halt by heckling and conducting a "die in" in the cathedral's aisles.

The AIDS activists said they were protesting November's pronouncements by both the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and by the Vatican that condoms must never be used as protection against AIDS — a position that places the church in conflict with health authorities throughout the world.

A year ago, American bishops gave their tentative blessing to safe-sex teaching in public schools, but that approval was rescinded in early November following intense pressure from O'Connor and other conservative bishops. One week later, the U. S. positions were adopted by attendees at the first Vatican conference on AIDS.

The activists inside St. Patrick's sat quietly through the first half of the mass, which included various prayers and readings from the Bible.

But as O'Connor began his sermon, heckling erupted from a small section of the congregation about half-way back in the church.

News reporters were prevented from approaching the scene of the protest, but activists apparently lay down in the aisles and conducted one of their now commonplace die-ins.

As the disturbance began, O'Connor stopped his homily and said, "Let us pray."

He then led the congregation in some 10-15 minutes of standard Catholic prayers, including "The Lord's Prayer" and the "Hail Mary."

As the prayers were repeated over and over, ushers circulated transcripts of the aborted homily and police slowly removed 43 demonstrators, carrying some of them out on orange stretchers.

O'Connor resumed the mass while the protest continued and some observers were shocked that demonstrators shouted insults at the Cardinal during the service's most solemn moments.

Catholics believe that priests can change bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Known as "transubstantiation," the events occur when a priest says the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood."

As the Cardinal spoke over the bread, one of the demonstrators shouted, "O'Connor, you're a murderer."

Parishioners near the front of the cathedral were again scandalized some moments later when one protestor went forward for communion and, rather than consuming the wafer, smashed it between his fingers and dropped it to the floor. A number of priests quickly dove to the floor and scooped up the tiny remains.

After careful scrutiny of the area where the bread had fallen, one priest reverently carried the bits away in his cupped hands.

The demonstration outside on Fifth Avenue continued in the sub-freezing weather throughout the debacle inside. New York police said that 68 additional demonstrators were arrested for blocking the street at various points during the three-hour protest.

The activists carried signs that read: "Keep your mass off our ass," "Eternal life for Cardinal O'Connor — NOW!" and "Curb your dogma."

And they chanted such things as "He's a Nazi in a dress, the Cardinal's morals are a mess" and "For every ejaculation, a college education."

Flyers charged that Catholic bishops have overstepped the bounds between church and state by trying to force their morality on all Americans.

Catholicism

The Catholic church opposes condom use by anyone in any circumstances because church teaching demands that every sexual act be "open to the possibility of procreation."

Since using a condom to prevent the transmission of disease would also prevent sperm from contacting an egg, Pope John Paul II had said the devices violate God's plan for the universe and are sinful.

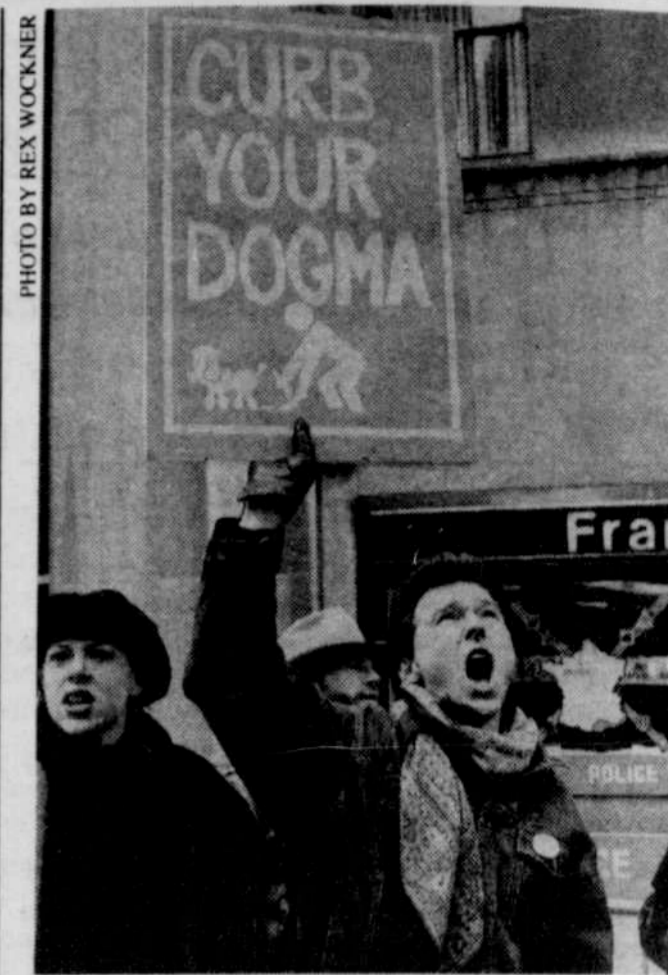
For the same reasons, all Catholics are forbidden from having gay sex, masturbating, engaging in oral sex to orgasm, or doing any other non-potentially-procreative sex act.

The church opposes abortion because it believes that at the moment a sperm contacts an egg, God instills a unique and sacred soul into the new creation.

New War With Gays

Relations between the Catholic Church and gays have been on a downslide since 1986, when Rome's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a letter asserting that a homosexual orientation is "more or less ordered toward intrinsic moral evil."

Previously, Rome had condemned homosexual acts but maintained that merely being gay was "morally neutral" — a position that has allowed seminaries in recent years to ordain a high percentage of gay priests, as



long as they promise to be celibate.

The 1986 letter also demanded that Catholic groups using Catholic buildings fully support all church teaching.

As a result, chapters of the gay/lesbian Catholic group Dignity were evicted from their parishes throughout the U. S. and Canada in the past two years.

Dignity's bylaws contradict church teaching by stating that gays can express their sexuality in a manner that is "consonant with Christ's teachings."

Members of Dignity/New York participated in the ACT UP demonstration, according to president Robert Pusillo. He said his group supported the action except for the disruption of mass.

A Dignity direct-action arm, the Cathedral Project, has protested monthly at St. Patrick's since the group was ousted from its parish two years ago. Cardinal O'Connor eventually received a restraining order preventing the group from standing silently throughout mass. Since then, the Project has celebrated "alternative liturgies" across the street.

"We support ACT UP because the church is dictating how non-Catholics should conduct their lives," Pusillo explained.

Pusillo took strong exception to the desecration of the "host" [consecrated bread] by one ACT UP member, but added that the secular community cannot be expected to respect Catholic dogma.

"The church brings it down on its own head," he said. "It's like a fascist state. You cannot claim divine right when you abuse people the way the Catholic church does."

As the demonstration wound down, ACT UP spokesperson, Jay Blotcher said the group plans to attempt dialogue with O'Connor and other church officials about the fact that condoms save lives, but he said activists do not harbor any illusions of changing the Roman Catholic Church.

At a press conference following the mass, O'Connor said, "the Archbishop of New York must always preach what the church preaches and teach what the church teaches."

He said the ACT UP protest should have been "peaceful" and he expressed anguish about the desecration of Christ's body when the communion wafer was destroyed.

New York Mayor Ed Koch, who is Jewish, attended both the mass and the press conference. He told reporters he was there to "defend the cathedral."

About 200 pro-life demonstrators came for the same purpose. They peacefully held signs on a corner opposite the ACT UP demonstration.