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Steppin' Out



The angelic, newly-coming-out lesbian support group at their 1989 Christmas Party. This is another step in their coming out process.

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P A G E T W O

An atheist ex-seminarian at mass

As the throngs of concelebrating priests process past the media corner, I look directly at each one and sense that many are gay (you know how that goes)

BY REX WOCKNER

The assignment to cover ACT UP New York's now-infamous "Stop the Church" demo at St. Patrick's Cathedral December 10 left me uneasy for several weeks in advance.

I had not been inside a Catholic church since 1984 when I left the seminary after deciding, one-by-one:

- that gay sex is good,
- that the Pope is not infallible,
- that the Catholic dogmas on Jesus's divinity are internally contradictory,

— and, finally, that a casual look at the world I live in suggested that the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent god of Christianity does not exist.

By now, my seminary days seem like another life on another planet. But one emotion has stuck with me throughout the years — a periodic sick feeling in my gut that I knew would surge up during the St. Pat's mass.

Both of my seminaries — St. Meinrad College in St. Meinrad, Indiana and the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois — were 60 to 70 percent gay. About half of the men — 30 to 35 percent of the students — were out-of-the-closet. At St. Meinrad, we were called "the Family." We had regular tables at the campus bar, the Unstable.

Later, the year I was at St. Mary of the Lake, tensions between gay students and the few heterosexuals exploded and we had a major campus symposium at which the straights were told by seminary officials to be more tolerant of the gays. Among much else,

the straights were angry about the seminary double standard. Gay students, they pointed out, were permitted discrete romantic affairs while straights got in trouble for having women in their dorm rooms.

This is also how things stand today in the Archdiocese of New York, of course. Father Andrew Greeley, a heterosexual, wrote an article this fall for the National Catholic Reporter complaining that Catholic rectories are becoming "lavender houses."

He complained about a "national network" of actively homosexual clergy.

Father is a little slow to catch on to trends. The network has had a newsletter for years.

So, knowing all this, and more, there I am at mass in St. Pat's. As the throngs of concelebrating priests process past the media corner, I look directly at each one and sense that many are gay (you know how that goes). In a way, of course, this is neither a big deal nor hot news. Who cares what Father does with his weenie anyway.

But with my personal history and my double insider's perspective, all I saw was my gay friends sitting out in the congregation fighting for their lives and then the gay priests (whose justifications and excuses I know intimately) standing up at the altar lending support to the church's anti-condom death campaign.

I felt sick. But even more, I felt terribly embarrassed and terribly sorry to have ever been connected with such an unconscionably hypocritical institution. I flashed back to the week at St. Mary of the Lake when two of the deacons who were going to take their vow of celibacy a few days later were caught at the glory holes at the adult bookstore on the

interstate just over the Wisconsin line.

I know: who cares what Father does with his weenie. Humans are by nature contradictory. Many of us probably have things in our past or present similar to being a sexually active celibate who preaches against condoms but uses them.

I suppose if it weren't for the feeling in my gut, I'd just let the matter drop and leave the gay priests to bask in their hard-won integration of contradictions. I'd justify my silence with the logic that gay priests are no more screwed up than many other people.

But according to the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator — a psychological test the seminary gave me — I'm a *feeler*, not a *thinker*. And my emotions side with ACT UP and its chant, "You say don't fuck, we say fuck you."

We've grown used to hearing ACT UP shout: "We die, they do nothing." But in the case of these priests, I sense something much worse. We die, and our gay brothers reload the automatic assault rifles. Once I absorbed this fact, I began to feel that smashing up a piece of Jesus-bread, as one ACT UPper did, was a surprisingly restrained protest.

As you read this, politicians and gay leaders continue tripping over each other to attack ACT UP for having dared to take its anger *inside* the cathedral. But I have to say that my shock lies in quite the opposite direction. I'm surprised somebody didn't dynamite the whole tabernacle where the whole bowl of Jesus-bread is kept.

That might have begun to address my emotions about just how evil it is for this quintessentially hypocritical church to try to insert its bizarre and completely discredited theology into sound public health policy.

"O'Connor, you're a murderer," one ACT UPper shouted at the Cardinal as he "transubstantiated" the bread into Jesus's body.

A murderer who rules over a den of hypocritical disciples worshipping their own convoluted logic of self-justification.