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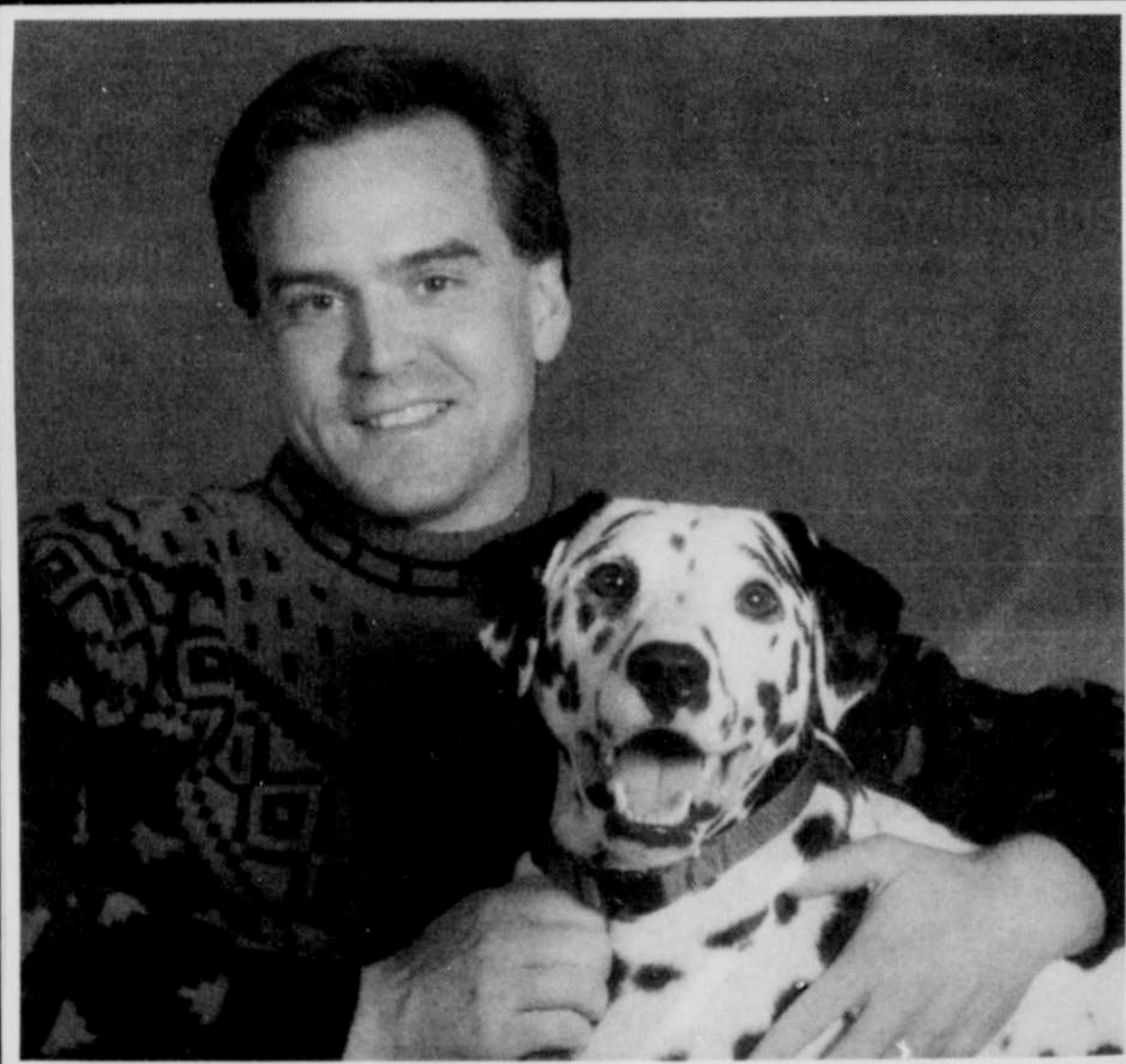
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## national news

### Mighty message

Dignity/USA urges Catholic bishops to put the words of their pastoral letter into action: 'Love and accept your children'

by Bob Roehr

Fearing reactionary pressure from conservatives, Dignity/USA called upon the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to reaffirm its October pastoral letter, "Always Our Children," and concentrate on implementing it.

Dignity/USA, a gay and lesbian Catholic group, made the plea Nov. 10 at noon outside a Washington, D.C., hotel where the bishops were meeting.

"Dignity salutes this issuance from the bishops as an important statement of the teaching of our Church that all of God's children are to be loved and included in the life of the church," said Robert F. Mialovich, Dignity's national president. "Parents do not have to choose between loving their gay and lesbian children and following any teaching of the Church."

He added, "Unfortunately some mean and harsh voices have emerged, urging the recall or a substantial watering down of the letter and its recommendations."

Charles Cox, Dignity's executive director, also urged the bishops to put the words and message of "Always Our Children" into action.

"Many lesbians and gays see it as a sign of hope; their parents see [it] as a reaffirmation of their earlier decisions to love and accept us, their children," he said. "It prompted many of our parents to pick up the phone and call us, to tell us how much they love us and the families we have created."

He continued, "But we also heard the painful stories of gay and lesbian adolescents being kicked out of their homes because of their orientation. Or

of seeking guidance from a priest only to be told: 'There is no place for you here, your son or daughter is going to hell.'"

Cox pointed to the White House Conference on Hate Crimes, taking place that same day, as underscoring the need to implement the letter. He said the bishops have an opportunity to reduce hate crimes by helping priests of the diocese become more sensitive to the gay and lesbian community.

Meanwhile, an estimated 30 conservatives gathered outside the hotel a few yards away, reciting the rosary and praying. Many carried signs reading "Sex Ed: Fodder of Pedophiles and Homosexuals" and "Stop Molesting Our Children's Minds."

Several times a gaunt older man, dressed in a black-and-white-checked sport coat with an oleaginous sheen, broke away to approach the ongoing Dignity news conference.

"Dignity means sodomizing children," he shouted as he turned tail and scurried away. A few minutes later he was back. "How many of you are gay because you were sodomized by priests?" came the harangue and again the quick retreat.

Tommy Economus, the founder of Linkup: Survivors of Clergy Abuse, tried to use the media opportunity to push for the bishops to issue a letter on pedophile abuse.

Mialovich reacted angrily, rejecting Economus' intrusion. "Pedophilia has nothing to do with homosexuality," he said.

"You're absolutely right," Economus responded.



Charles Cox

### Clinton hosts hate crimes conference

Hate crimes "strike at the heart of what it means to be an American," said President Clinton during the White House Conference on Hate Crimes held in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 10.

The conference grew out of Clinton's yearlong effort toward racial reconciliation.

The nation's chief executive also endorsed a bill sponsored by Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Penn.) and Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) that would expand the definition and scope of federal hate crimes legislation. The measure would add hate crimes based on sexual orientation, gender and disability.

The Justice Department recorded 8,759 hate crimes in 1996, a 10 percent increase from the previous year. Of that number, 63 percent were racially motivated and 14 percent were based on religion, while ethnic origin and sexual orientation each accounted for 11 percent.

But the department acknowledged that the definition of a hate crime and the interest and accuracy in recording and prosecuting those crimes varies greatly between local jurisdictions.

The extensive public materials prepared by the

White House and posted on its Web site focused on racial discrimination. Its only mention of sexual orientation was in the definition of hate crimes. Proposed initiatives used generic language of hate crimes, while the "case study" examples were all racial in nature.

Sheila Kuehl, a lesbian and member of the California Legislature, told the group, "We're all prepared to be there for each other."

The anti-gay activist Fred Phelps and his backers paraded outside with their "God Hates Fags" posters. They had done the same a few nights earlier outside the Human Rights Campaign dinner where Clinton also spoke.

Kerry Lobel, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, meanwhile, praised the conference. She said the initiatives would "help provide momentum and leverage for local individuals and organizations who deal with bias crimes on a daily basis."

NGLTF played a leading role in passing federal legislation to gather statistics on hate crimes against lesbians and gay men and thus document the extent of the problem. It has been holding a series of town meetings on the subject in cities across the country.

Bob Roehr