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—Deanna

2. Do not confuse faith in God with faith in the church

Simply put, the institutional church and everyday parish life are two separate worlds.

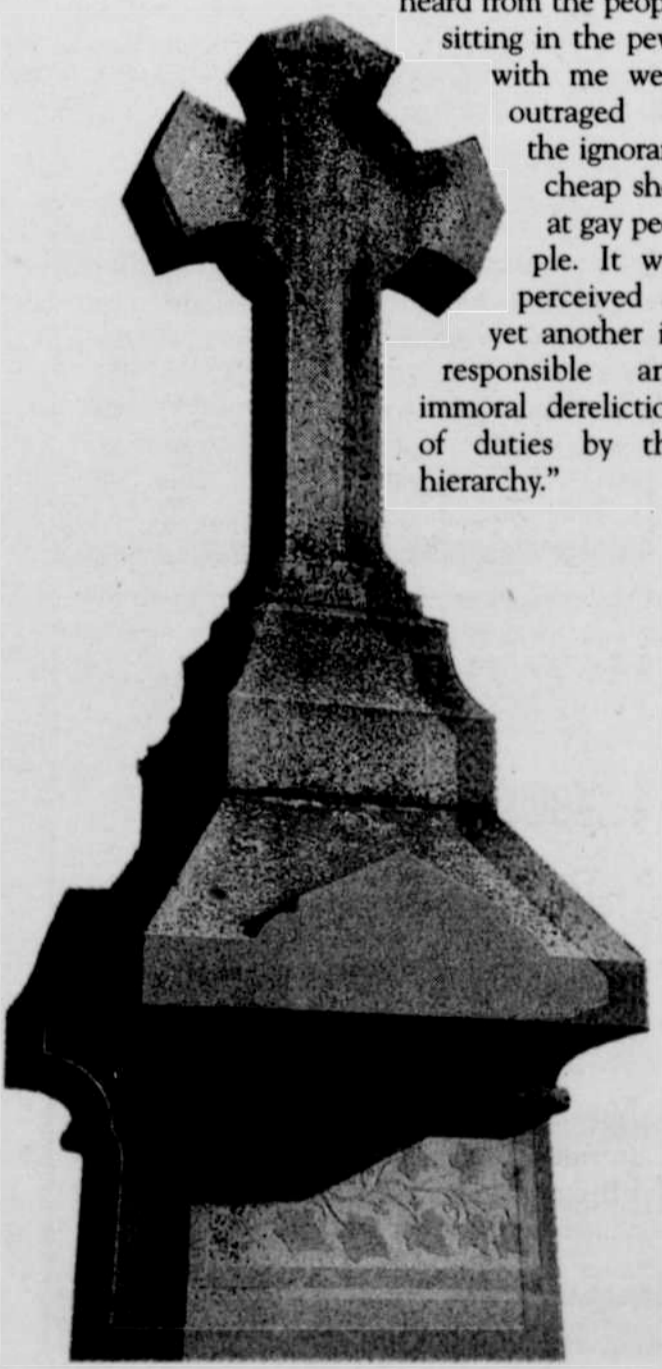
"Those of us in the trenches have to make the wheels turn sometimes in spite of what management thinks is best," fellow queer Catholic Deanna contends. "The people need to take control of their own church and drive the church from the roots up and not let the hierarchy have so much power."

This upsurge already can be seen in some Portland parishes where sexual minorities who have shunned the church in the past have returned to find communities such as St. Andrew and Southeast Portland's St. Philip Neri welcoming them with open arms.

Deanna is a real-life example of rediscovering a modern Catholicism that is more open and accepting. At 17, she was asked to leave her parish because she is a lesbian. About 30 years passed before she felt the strength to return to church—any church—last February.

"When the gay-blaming started popping up around the scandal, I was very afraid that after having restarted my spiritual journey, I would again have to face a major rejection," Deanna says. But "the voices I

heard from the people sitting in the pews with me were outraged at the ignorant cheap shot at gay people. It was perceived as yet another irresponsible and immoral dereliction of duties by the hierarchy."



Deanna's faith soon found even more solid ground when she learned to disassociate the people of the church from the hierarchy of its power structure. "Having been very deeply wounded by the rejection of church officials that squelched my spirit as a kid, that separation was something I had to discern prior to investigating any organized religion."

Sister Beatrice acknowledges that some might have their faith shaken by recent events. "I think the more people have their faith tied to the institution, if they think priests are like saints and walk on water, then it's going to be a really big disappointment. But, my faith is bigger than what happens with the personnel of the church."

She offers a convincing and instructive parallel that compares the hierarchy of the Catholic Church with the country's political leaders.

"Was I happy with what Clinton did? No, I wasn't happy. Did I leave the country? No, I didn't. I didn't stop being American," says Sister Beatrice, recalling the White House sex scandal involving Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton. "I don't condone it. I wasn't proud of it. But it's my country, and he doesn't represent all politicians."

Another analogy Sister Beatrice presents is the extreme importance of the family, a central component of many cultures and common to her own Latino heritage. "If our families distance us, it's very painful because we don't have anywhere else to go, because we're not individualists."

Father Abraham echoes that sentiment. He believes homosexual clergy and laity remain in the church, despite its often anti-gay stance, because to remain Catholic they have no other place to go. "In the Catholic Church, you're either in or out. There's no in between."

Some "live the lie" in order to continue to serve their larger faith. Others remain in the church to work for acceptance from within.

"I'm there as a gay person," Father Abraham affirms. "Every day of the week that I go to church, I'm there. Maybe Rome doesn't know I'm there, but I'm still knocking on the door. And, by knocking on that door, someday I'm going to get it to open just a little bit more."

Pat, a member of St. Andrew, adds: "My personal faith is firmly based on my relationship with God and the nourishment I receive from my faith community. A situation resulting from church hierarchy policies and sick priests is very frustrating but does not shake my faith. I believe that as a result of this extremely frustrating, painful time, the Catholic Church hierarchy will make some serious changes. For that reason, I am hopeful rather than rattled."



3. Do not be ruled by dogma

For biblical literalists and others who perceive religion in black-and-white terms, a queer Catholic can seem a contradiction. Indeed, some sexual minority Catholics opt to leave the church altogether, while others choose to participate in offshoot ministries. For those who choose to remain,

is accepting a religion that rejects your sexual identity hypocritical?

"If you're following the black-and-white paradigm, it is," Sister Beatrice responds. "But it's not a black-and-white church. There are a good many gray issues, and that's why we're encouraging you to follow your conscience. Think for yourself about what does it mean for you to be a member of this organization and this religion."

Constance, a Portland lesbian Catholic, observes how the letter of the law matters further up in the hierarchy, but the spirit of the law prevails more strongly below. She shares with others the belief that the disconnect between U.S. parishes and the Vatican is more than a myopic condition of an old-fashioned Holy See. It's a matter of ecclesial interpretation and of following a pastoral ministry rather than enforcing prescriptive doctrine. It's

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taking Vatican legislation with a grain of salt and following one's conscience.

"There are those who say, 'I don't want to be part of this institution, and I'm happy to not deal with it,'" Sister Beatrice explains. "And then there are others who feel, 'I get to be a sexual human being. That's part of my spirituality. The Divine lives in me, and I'm a spiritual being, and part of my sexuality is part of the Divine.'"

As an example, Sister Beatrice describes the traditional relationship model of Western culture as a monogamous marriage involving one man and one woman. The polyamory movement, in contrast, allows for permutations of that structure because it is a paradigm based on sustaining intimacy rather than building a conventional nuclear family. So, too, are there different paradigms within Catholicism, some in contrast to canon law but in harmony with the religion's overall spiritual goals.

"There's a need to be pastoral, to be human, to have compassion," Sister Beatrice says. "Different priests and religious interpret the dogma in different ways. Some are going to be more literal and church-abiding because they believe this is how they will be saved. And there are those who feel they are going to follow this to the best of their ability and to the best of how they understand it. If you're committed to the institution and you want to work within it or want to live within it—I don't want to say that people cheat or lie to themselves—but there's a way in which they find room for themselves within it." □

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