



Sister Tasha Salad shows that benevolence is beautiful at C.C. Slaughters.

Unlike more traditional nuns, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an order of many faiths, religions and beliefs. They acknowledge that many of their ceremonies and even their name can be traced back to the Roman Catholic Church and insist that, far from mocking nuns, they honor them—that they are in fact the nuns of the gay community. Just as Mother Teresa's convent took to wearing saris after transplanting to India to blend in with that culture, the Sisters dress in a manner that befits their community. Way back in 1978, the rainbow flag, now the defining international symbol of queer human rights, was invented (and hand-dyed) by Gilbert Baker, aka Sister Chanel 2001.

According to the group's official mission statement, "The Sisters believe all people have a right to express their unique joy and beauty and use humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit." To that end, they work to promulgate universal joy, expiate stigmatic guilt and serve the community, straddling a peculiar line between sybaritism and selflessness. Mottos adopted by the San Francisco Motherhouse have included "Go forth and sin some more" and "It is not wise to say no to free drinks, cheap jewelry, discount cosmetics or pretty boys."

The original Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were exclusively gay male nuns. Over time, they have become more inclusive. Today their members include men, women and trans people; gay, straight and bisexual; Latino, black, Asian and white. They are equally accepting of people's religion or spirituality of choice, if any. Says Sister Mona Little-Moore of the Portland house, "Our members cover a broad spectrum of spirituality."

The Sisters hold an annual conclave, a congregation of Sisters from around the world, in a different location each year. The 2006 conclave was held in Los Angeles. Insofar as the organization has a head governing body, it is the United Nuns Privy Council, composed of members from all the different conclaves. The Un-PC's job is to guide new missions through the process of becoming fully professed houses.

Most of the Sisters preserve their anonymity behind delightful mock-Catholic names such as Sister Barbi Mitzvah, Sister Roxanne Roles,



The sisters expanded their philanthropic reach by walking a mile in high heels with the Sexual Assault Resource Center in Beaverton.

Sister Harlette O'Scara and Sister Hedra Sexual, the Nun Too Straight.

So, how did this phenomenal group come to exist in the first place? Like so many other unexplained miracles, it started in the '70s.

An (Incomplete) Sistory Lesson

In 1976, the year of our nation's bicentennial, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a convent of Roman Catholic nuns lent some retired habits to a group of men performing their version of *The Sound of Music*. Three years later, those habits resurfaced in the streets of San Francisco's Castro district in a form scarcely imagined by their original owners.

On Easter weekend 1979 in San Francisco, one year after the assassination of openly gay City Supervisor Harvey Milk, three men went out into the streets in full, traditional nun's habits. One even carried a machine gun and smoked a cigar. They were met with shock and amazement and captured everyone's interest. Their next appearance was at a softball game where their pompon routine all but stole the show, and by the time of that year's Castro Street Fair, they were ready to take in new members. In the fall of '79, Sister Hysterectoria (who designed the group's first habits) and the Reverend Mother went to the first International Faerie gathering (what has since become known as the Radical Faeries) and encountered even more men with the calling.

Entering the '80s, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence continued to raise, in its own witty words, "tempers, eyebrows and funds." Its first benefit in 1980, benefiting gay Cuban refugees, was a spectacular success: \$1,500 raised in one evening by a fledgling community collective. In 1982 the Sisters joined with a team of medical profes-



Founding member Sista Anita Lynchin' embodies the order's mystifying aesthetic.

sionals to create *Play Fair!* The first pamphlet to use plain, sex-positive language, practical advice and humor, *Play Fair!* preceded the AIDS pandemic and introduced the catch phrase "safe sex" into popular culture. Also that year, Sister Boom-Boom ran for supervisor of San Francisco, campaigned hard and nearly won.

In 1983 the Sisters helped orchestrate the first-ever AIDS Candlelight Vigil, where one of the speakers was Sister Florence Nightmare, who also appeared in August of that year on the cover of *Newsweek*, the first time that the topic of AIDS was handled in a fairly unbiased manner in the mainstream press.

When Pope John Paul II visited San Francisco in 1987, the Sisters greeted him with a red carpet and performed a ritual exorcism in his (dis)honor, in response to the Catholic Church's harsh condemnation of homosexuality issued the previous year. The pope reacted by placing the Sisters on the Papal List of Heretics, leading one to wonder, which is actually the bigger bunch of drama queens?

Beginning in 1995, the San Francisco Sisters expanded their fund-raising efforts to benefit women with breast cancer and the movement to legalize marijuana. In 1996 they attended the infamous Burning Man festival in the Nevada badlands for the first time, serving medicinal brownies and tequila to parched and needy pagans. The following year, they showed their support for queer youth by organizing an alternative prom. The year after that, the Sisters organized "Wig Out," a wig drive collecting from San Francisco drag queens hundreds of new and reconditioned wigs for women undergoing chemotherapy. In 1999 their 20th anniversary was marked by an Easter birthday celebration in the Castro, an updated reissue of *Play Fair!* and the organization's first international conclave.

Losing none of their conviction or flair for theatrics with the turn of the millennium, the Sisters in 2001 issued a proclamation declaring June to be National Gay Pride Month after President Bush refused to do so. (Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, had issued a similar procla-

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