



The sisters trek from the Old Town Max stop to Darcelle XV Showplace to vote for Coronation 2007 candidates.



Novices Camela Toe (left) and Oraleé Pleasures are working toward full-fledged sisterhood.



Sister Irma Geddon stays dry at the car wash.

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mation in June 1999.) They were also elected grand marshals of the San Francisco Pride celebration. In 2003 they appeared in the Pride parade, displaying their counterpart to the pontiff, Pope Dementia the Last, in a cage on a float dedicated to the discovery of "Weapons of Ass Destruction." That year alone they raised \$100,000, most of which was returned to the community.

Undoubtedly, the saga of the Sisters is far from over. As their 30th anniversary approaches, they continue to inflame the religious right, stir up controversy and make headlines. On Oct. 7 two of the San Francisco Sisters attended Sunday Mass and received communion wafers and wine from Archbishop George Niederauer of Most Holy Redeemer Church in the Castro. In the face of the ensuing conservative outcry, Niederauer apologized for having delivered the Eucharist to members of the excommunicated group, providing just the sort of priceless publicity the Sisters have grown so adept at converting into charity dollars.

As of the time of this writing, a *San Francisco Gate* article on the incident had drawn 723 reader remarks, ranging from murderous outrage to outright adulation. A YouTube video of the event in question—available for viewing at www.links.sfgate.com/ZBFL—shows the Sisters, despite their outlandish attire, behaving in a respectful manner as they receive communion from the archdiocese. It's an informative look at how something that is really *nothing* may be distorted beyond all recognition by the cloistered and clueless. As so often in these kinds of debates, the real division seems to be not between believers and non-believers, but between those who possess a healthy sense of humor and those with absolutely none.

Benevolent Bliss

Having rapidly skipped through the history of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Motherhouse, we now turn to the incipient adventures of the Portland chapter. The Order of Benevolent Bliss was founded June 18, 2005, the kickoff date for that year's Portland Pride celebration. With the help of Sisters who flew in from the Abbey of St. Joan in Seattle, Portland introduced its own new house during that weekend's celebration. Its three founding members were Sister Anita Lynchin', Sister Anna Rexia and Sister Mona Little-Moore of the Vocal Desire.

An aspiring house must first apply for 501(c)3 status—legal recognition as a nonprofit entity. This requires the house to put on six fund-raising events a year, 20 events total per annum. The house must have no paid members and is required to hold a general business meeting at least once a year. Each new house, while in most ways autonomous, functions under the guidance of a mentor—an older, established house—for its first year or two. The Order of Benevolent Bliss acknowledges a great deal of influence from its Seattle mentor.

There's also the San Francisco Motherhouse to appease. It requires each new house to come up with a signature look, meaning they must design their own coronet and, if desired, choose their house's signature color. Portland doesn't have a signature color.

"The San Francisco House is very protective of the organization's name," reveals Sister Mona, prioress of the Order Benevolent Bliss. "There have been some in the past who have done what they could to damage the SPI name."

Sister Mona is ambivalent about the eponymous San Francisco chapter's long history of theatrical provocation. She references the recent uproar over San Francisco's Folsom Street Fair, a major affair for the kink and leather community in which the Sisters have taken part annually since 1992. This year Miller Brewing Co., under pressure from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, removed its logo from the festival's promotional poster. The poster—which transmogrifies Leonardo da Vinci's famous mural "The Last Supper," depicting Jesus as a naked, buff black man surrounded by leather folk in varying stages of undress—drew the ire of the Catholic League's president, Bill Donohue, a longtime Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence detractor.

"I think the poster was brilliant, but there's a vocal minority in the religious community that will vilify the Sisters any chance they get," says Sister Mona. "I'm not so into the political aspect of it, because personally I think it gets in the way of the work we're doing."

It was Sister Mona who designed the coronet worn by all of the Portland chapter's fully professed members. Each house designs and names its own. The Los Angeles house calls its coronets "Hollywood bowls." The San Diego house refers to its as "moose ears." San Francisco famously dubbed its headpieces "ear brassieres."

Portland's coronets, called "fruit bowls," suffered a bumpy takeoff. For the first year they were fashioned out of buckram, a stiff and starchy mesh fabric with an inconvenient tendency to melt. This did not bode

well for candlelight vigils, and after much tinkering, Sister Mona engineered something better: Starting with an upside-down lampshade and ABS plastic (the same material as Lego blocks), she came up with a suitable alternative. It adheres to the wearer's wimple with Velcro.

But a Sister's sartorial woes are far from over even after arranging her habit. "Makeup is one of the harshest aspects of being a sister," Sister Mona says. "The white clown face is our signature." As far as clothing, the Sisters scour used women's clothing stores and do a lot of their own sewing. "The store Savvy, in Lloyd Center, gives us a discount," she smiles.

Sister Tasha Salad adds, "Gold lamé just goes with everything."

So what, besides the charity work, is the difference between a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence and your garden-variety drag queen?

"Everything a drag queen does is designed to draw attention to herself," says Sister Mona. "Whereas a Sister's white face reflects back on the people. We are here to do work."

The Order of Benevolent Bliss is still young, having spent its first two years learning a lot about how to exist as a nonprofit entity and jumping through the various hoops such status entails. In particular, members were surprised by state regulations that hampered their efforts to start a monthly bingo night, which they envision as the lynchpin of their fund-raising efforts, as it has been for Sisters elsewhere. It turns out that bingo is considered a "game of chance" by Oregon law, meaning a gambling license is required to host it, the same as hosting a Monte Carlo night or a high-end raffle (one in which \$10,000 or more is given away).

"That came as a shock to us," Sister Mona says. "We've been looking forward to getting it started for two years now." As of this writing, they've finally satisfied all the requirements and expect to host their first bingo in December. The only remaining question is location. They've narrowed it down to two choices: Fez Ballroom or Portland Policeman's Athletic Association. A venue such as Q Center wouldn't be appropriate for the size of event they have in mind. "We're looking to host a crowd of 200 to 400 people," Sister Mona explains. "The Seattle chapter sells out their bingo events at 800 or 900 people, and we'd be happy with half that many."

Missionary Positions

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