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New documentary depicts Jesuit's struggle for LGBT rights

Jamie Manson | Jun. 18, 2012 Grace on the Margins

With the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's very public battle against same-sex marriage and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's recent condemnation of Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley's sexual ethics book, *Just Love*, it seems hard to remember a time when the Roman Catholic Church *wasn't* fixated on LGBT issues.

In "Taking a Chance on God," Irish-born filmmaker Brendan Fay reminds us that not only is this struggle relatively new in church history, but the momentum behind the movement began with one courageous priest and his groundbreaking book.

The film offers a portrait of John McNeill, the Jesuit priest who was silenced in 1977 for his book *The Church and the Homosexual* and, nine years later, was expelled from his order for refusing to stay silent in his ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics.

The film had its New York City premiere this weekend as part of the 40th anniversary celebration of the New York chapter of Dignity USA, a community McNeill helped found. The film includes a number of insightful interviews from fellow priest activist Dan McCarthy, theologian Mary Hunt, openly gay priest Bernard Lynch, gay rights activist Ginny Appuzzo, and the late activist Jesuit Fr. Robert Carter.

Fay's documentary offers a full depiction of McNeill's life as well as a window into the gay struggle for liberation in both church and society amid the terrifying backdrop of the AIDS crisis. Two sections of the film are particularly powerful: McNeill's calling to the priesthood and his calling forth out of the silence imposed on him by the Vatican.

Born and raised in Buffalo, N.Y., McNeill enlisted to serve in WWII at 17. He was quickly shunted into the infantry and onto the front lines. In their first battle, his company was decimated from 190 men to 29. German tanks surrounded their outfit, and McNeill was taken prisoner by the Nazis.

He was put on a freight car and sent to a POW camp in Germany near the Polish border. They were given no

food or water for the journey, and many men in his car perished on the way. McNeill survived by licking the frost off of nails.

The Nazis continued to starve the inmates as they worked in the camp. Down to 80 pounds, one day McNeill noticed a Polish slave laborer mixing a mash of potatoes and carrots for the horses. The laborer took compassion on McNeill and surreptitiously tossed him a potato. When McNeill looked at the man with gratitude, the laborer responded by making the sign of the cross.

"That was to me such a beautiful insight," McNeill reflects, "that his faith gave him the courage to risk his life to feed a complete stranger. I wanted that kind of faith and that kind of courage to be ready to risk my life to help somebody in need."

After the war, McNeill pursued a vocation to the Jesuits. He was ordained at Fordham University and was later sent to the University of Louvain to study dogmatic and moral theology.

His life as an activist began while teaching ethics at LeMoyne University in Syracuse, N.Y., where McNeill became a vocal opponent to the Vietnam War. His status as a former POW gave his crusade much credibility.

After the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York City, McNeill's activism took on a new life as an advocate for gays and lesbians. He responded to anti-gay forces like Anita Bryant and psychiatrist Charles Socarides by writing a series of articles that affirmed the goodness of gays and lesbians and explored the holiness of love between same-sex couples.

The articles became so influential and crucial that a number of scholars encouraged McNeill to gather them into a book. The manuscript was sent to seven Jesuit theologians, all of whom strongly endorsed the text. McNeill then sent it to Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe for permission to publish the book.

Arrupe agreed, and in 1976, the collection of articles was published under the title *The Church and the Homosexual*. The book took by storm not only the Catholic world, but the mainstream media as well. Tom Brokaw, Phil Donahue and Larry King all interviewed McNeill, who came out publicly in front of 20 million views of the "Today" show.

The Vatican was less thrilled about the book's success. By 1977, Cardinal Franjo Seper*, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, silenced McNeill from writing and speaking publicly about homosexuality.

McNeill's devotion to the Society of Jesus and the order's "fourth vow" of allegiance to the pope compelled him to comply with the silencing.

"There's a certain naiveté that accompanies priesthood when you give yourself so young to something for the right reasons," explains Bernard Lynch in the film. "I think he believed, because he believed in his Catholicism, that the truth would out."

McNeill remained silent for nine years, though he continued to offer small workshops and counseling to gay and lesbian Catholics. He also said Mass for the New York City chapter of Dignity, which at the time met the Church of St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit-led parish in Greenwich Village. He also served as a psychotherapist to the gay and lesbian community until 1983, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger put a stop to that ministry.

But in the early 1980s, as AIDS began to ravage gay communities in the city, silence increasingly became a deadly force.

"We were visiting our sick, we were burying our dead, we were serving each other in love and compassion," Ginny Appuzzo says. Victims of AIDS were dying at alarming rates, but leaders in the church and government seemed unmoved by the cries of the sick and their family and friends.

At the peak of the AIDS crisis in 1986, in what may have been the worst pastoral timing in the Roman Catholic Church's recent history, Cardinal Ratzinger issued the CDF's "Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." It defined homosexuality as "an objective disorder" and "a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil."

Because Dignity supported loving, committed relationships between same-sex couples, they were by necessity expelled from Catholic parishes. The film includes remarkable footage of hundreds of men and women from Dignity processing in a candlelight vigil down steps of the Church of St. Francis Xavier and into the street.

"People needed God most, and this is what they got," Lynch recalls.

The untold suffering of the AIDS crisis and the callousness of the letter compelled McNeill at last to break his silence. In 1986, McNeill decided that in conscience he must continue his public ministry among the gay community.

"I wanted to take away the guilt and self-hatred of gay Catholics who believed the church's position on homosexuality," McNeill says.

In response, leaders from his Jesuit province came to his apartment and read him a letter in Latin telling him that, because of his "pertinacious disobedience," he was to pack his things, leave immediately and never return.

Although profoundly wounded by his dismissal, Fay shows the ways in which McNeill's life flourished outside the walls of the institutional church. Undergirding the film is the moving love story of McNeill's 40-year partnership with Charles Chiarelli. The two were legally married in Canada in 2008.

McNeill continued to write and offer retreats throughout the country and presided at countless liturgies for Dignity chapters throughout the country. Gene Robinson, the firstly openly gay bishop in the Episcopal church, credits his own coming out to a retreat with McNeill.

Now 86, McNeill has slowed down considerably, but he continues to write and speak, most recently this weekend at the New York City premiere of the film.

Fay previously directed "Remembering Mychal" and co-produced "The Saint of 9/11," documentaries about Fr. Mychal Judge, the New York Fire Department chaplain who died in the World Trade Center tragedy on Sept. 11, 2001. Interestingly, McNeill was Judge's counselor, and both priests began The Upper Room AIDS Ministry, an outreach for homeless persons with AIDS in Harlem in the 1980s. The work continues today as Harlem United.

Although McNeill's story is one of hope and courage, an unspoken sorrow runs through the film. The hierarchy has only become more reactionary in its shaming of same-sex relationships and its suppression of those who affirm the goodness and holiness of LGBT persons. One cannot help but wonder if today, the superior general of any religious order would approve the publication of a book like *The Church and the Homosexual*.

But viewers will also find inspiration in the fact that, only 25 years after McNeill's expulsion, Catholics are now the strongest supporters of gay and lesbian rights and same-sex marriage in the United States.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Fay's film is that it brings the McNeill story to a much larger audience. And

in doing so, it allows McNeill to continue to answer that to which God first called him: to courageously and faithfully devote his life to feeding complete strangers.

"Taking a Chance on God" is currently on the film festival circuit. It continues on to screenings in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Belfast, Ireland. For more information about the film, visit takingachanceongod.com[1].

**An earlier version of this story misidentified the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1977.*

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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