Opinion
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Appreciation



Pax Nidorf (Courtesy of Pat McArron)



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On Feb. 11, 1971, Fr. Pat Nidorf, an Augustinian priest from San Diego, was called on the carpet by Los Angeles Archbishop Timothy Manning. Nidorf's sin? Arranging monthly self-help meetings for gay and lesbian Catholics in the basement of St. Brendan Church. Nidorf had named the group Dignity. As he later explained, "One of our basic goals was to bring dignity into the spiritual and social lives of some very special people."

The support group, which affirmed the goodness of same-sex relationships and celebrated gay and lesbian identities, was the first of its kind in the institutional Catholic Church. For the archbishop, that was also why it was "untenable."

Without Manning's permission to move forward, the gathering was illicit and Nidorf was unwelcome. The Augustinian became one of the first American priests and religious to be censured for his work with gay and lesbian Catholics. He would not be the last.

By the time that Nidorf was barred from ministry in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, he had already been leading Dignity for more than a year. In the late 1960s, he was a teacher at St. Augustine High School in San Diego, where he met students who struggled with their sexuality.

As a professional psychologist, Nidorf recognized the limits of the church's approach to homosexuality and proposed a group, as he later said, to confront the "excessive and unreal problem of guilt that was sometimes reinforced in the confessional instead of resolved."

After securing the support of his fellow Augustinians, Nidorf founded Dignity.

At that time, it was still unsafe to publicly identify as gay, so Dignity advertised in gay newspapers and magazines. To protect participants' identities, Nidorf interviewed potential members, who often used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, and sent out announcements about future meetings through a monthly newsletter.

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Dignity's first constitution, written in May 1970, argued that "homosexuality is a natural variation on the use of sex," and that gays and lesbians could be proud of their "responsible and fulfilling" experiences of sexual intimacy.

Nidorf, who died in in Escondido, California, on March 27, 2023, at the age of 91, was revolutionary at a time when the American Psychiatric Association still classified homosexuality as a mental disorder. Soon after Dignity's founding, letters seeking counsel and care poured in from around the country.

Nidorf moved the meeting to Los Angeles, where there were many more gays and lesbians and a much greater need for his work.

Months after Dignity's Los Angeles chapter began, its members clamored for archdiocesan recognition. In the years immediately following the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, laypeople were inspired to push for innovative ministries and forms of community to meet their spiritual needs. It was a time of experimentation and openness, long before Pope John Paul II expelled groups like Dignity from Catholic parishes. Dignity members were sorely disappointed when Manning banned them.

Nidorf's reaction to Manning's decision, however, reflected his personality. Rather than fighting back or creating a commotion, he quickly and quietly handed over leadership to capable laypeople. With Nidorf's resignation at a community potluck on February 20, 1971, Dignity became a lay-led group.

Marianne Duddy-Burke, current executive director of DignityUSA, recalled that Nidorf "clearly supported what Dignity had become as a lay-led ministry and organization and downplayed his own role in our birth. ... He always saw Dignity as a community, a legacy we build on to this day."

According to Pat McArron, who first met Nidorf in San Diego in 1971 and was DignityUSA president from 1999 to 2002, the Augustinian priest was "very friendly, very warm, cordial, [and] nonjudgmental."



Pax Nidorf (Courtesy of Pat McArron)

For years after leaving Dignity leadership, Nidorf returned to say Mass for local meetings and occasionally visited regional and national gatherings. McArron said that many Dignity members were fond of Nidorf, considering him the "grandfather" of the organization.

As happened with many priests in the heady years after Vatican II, the council set in motion changes to Father Pat's personal life as well. Just a few years after starting Dignity, Nidorf changed his name to Pax, left the priesthood, and exchanged his

celibate vocation for romantic love. In 1973, he married Dacia St. John, also a psychologist, and the pair were happily married for 26 years until her death in 1999.

After marrying, Pax continued to serve gays and lesbians as a therapist in private practice. In addition to writing spirituality-themed books, he developed his skills as an artist, a lifelong passion that he described as his "first love."

Many of his paintings incorporated religious and homoerotic themes. One of his favorite subjects to paint was the handsome face of a bloodied Christ wearing a crown of thorns, an image, perhaps, that reflected the suffering of gays and lesbians he served throughout his life.

Although Nidorf's most important contributions to LGBTQ ministry had already been made by the end of 1971, his interventions were critical to the future of the Catholic movement. According to McCarron, Nidorf "was the spark that lit the flame" for DignityUSA, an organization that has supported thousands of queer Catholics since it began more than half a century ago.

In a statement to mark Nidorf's death, current DignityUSA President Meli Barber shared, "Because Pax had the compassion, the vision, and the courage to understand that LGBTQIA+ Catholics needed a safe space to pray and find a spiritual home, people my age have never had to live in a world without Dignity. ... What an amazing gift to so many, and to the whole church."

At the 25th anniversary of Dignity San Diego's founding, Nidorf, by then a respected elder, encouraged the group "to share our strength, love and faith with one another. Let us challenge anyone who would question our validity."

As the movement for LGBTQ affirmation and pastoral care continues to advance in the Catholic Church, his words and actions challenge us now more than ever.

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