

The Order of Perpetual Indulgence has always sought through habitual manifestation to honour the very powerful women of the early church who so threatened the patriarchal boys club headed by the Holy Father — a club that confined generations of nuns to the cloister and enshrouded them in the torturous impractical and disabling garments right up until Vatican II in the 1960's, barely 30 years ago. We have noticed that those most offended by our Order are males, usually those who have tended to objectify and reduce female nuns to the status of powerless serving women to the male hierarchy.

While Mr Ford is correct in saying that Christian nuns are amongst those at the forefront of providing care to PLWA's, I would add that many Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have been and still are involved in our community's response to AIDS both through a playful and positive approach to safer sex promotion and a direct hands-on involvement through CSN, Ankali, the AIDS Council, BGF and other organisations. The hierarchies of the major Christian denominations however, have been noticeably lacking in any sort of compassionate response to the epidemic. In fact, in many cases their lofty pronouncements have been counter productive, homophobic and most un-Christian. I know from my discussions with Christian nuns that many of them share our anger and frustration at this and support our efforts at drawing attention to the more ridiculous and un-Christian attitudes of the august fathers.

The concept that Christian nuns are putting their health at risk by nursing persons with HIV/AIDS has puzzled us considerably. Are these sisters of other orders doing something with their patients that will put them at risk — exchanging body fluids? sharing needles?

Mr Ford's assertions that the Order of Perpetual Indulgence is responsible for the appalling street attacks made on gay men and lesbians seems to completely deny the obvious that homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians is one of the fundamental sicknesses of our society and has existed for far longer than the Order of Perpetual Indulgence. The suggestion that bashers should be encouraged by the gay community to turn their violence against the Sisters

reflects a disturbing attitude to any person Mr Ford considers does not conform to acceptable behaviour and appearances.

There are people both inside and outside of our community who believe that if gays and lesbians are quiet and invisible, that they will be accepted. The Sisters reject this lie. Silence and invisibility have led only to dismissal, persecution, and death for many. As long as there is a denial of human rights and persecution of people for being "different", there is a role for the Order of Perpetual Indulgence.

The Sisters offer a prayer to the most Holy Dingo (all praise her feralness) that Mr Ford will find the joy and delight of the path of Perpetual Indulgence.

*Mother Mary Armageddon
to be a Habit with you
Order of Perpetual
Indulgence,
Sydney,
for Sr Venus de Lilo
Sr Salome Body
Sr Seven Daily Adventures
Sr Antonia Bavaria
Sr Monstera Deliciosa
Hysterica
Sr Oscar Raven Wilde
Sr Mary Annalingus
Sr Mary Queen of Scots
Sr Mary Third Secret of
Fatima
Mother Mary Ambivalent
Vacillation
Sr Tuppovea Lacinia
Honey Bear
Sr Janus Timarama
Rockpool*

Catholics and AIDS

Dear Monsignor Editor,

I was reading my Catholic Weekly last week. It had a lovely eight page feature on Cardinal Newman, but omitted to say he was a queen. It also featured a report of Cardinal Sin's 30 minute sermon to the Asia/Pacific AIDS Conference in Canberra which was politely heard in silence, despite its being quite unrepresentative of the spiritual traditions of the Asian region, and quite insulting to gay men and to all people with HIV. He would prefer the deaths of thousands in the Philippines, rather than amend his archaic foibles about non-procreative sex.

I also noticed a two page report by a Catholic delegate to the San Francisco Conference. This reminded me that the Catholic church people involved in AIDS work in NSW seems to have decided to break the international boycott of that conference. So what happened to the solidarity with people with HIV and the compassion that we hear about in the sermons? We put up with their judg-

ementalism and moral idiocies, and when their commitment is tested, they flout the solidarity of community organisations around the world, and travel across borders forbidden to people with HIV.

It's time all charities, schools and hospitals receiving taxpayers money were completely secularised.

*Sister Mary Third Secret
of Fatima,
Order of Perpetual Indulgence*

Dear Editor,

After all the fuss generated in recent weeks by the demotion of ex-Mother Inferior, I feel it is time that someone takes responsibility for informing the public of the real history of the internal difficulties in the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

Too often, those who contribute to the good of others buckle under the stress. The sad truth of the

matter is that Fabian had veered away from the usual diverse spiritual goings on inside the sisterhood, and had increasingly been drawn to brutal, smelly and offensive voodoo rituals as a means of snaring an endless supply of new husbands.

In the middle of the night, during an otherwise pleasant and productive retreat in the bush, several nuns were woken from their slumbers by distressing squawking shrieks.

Naked, in the middle of a strange design chalked onto a large flat stone, stood the then Mother Inferior, his eyes turned inward, chanting incoherently, with a beheaded chook in his right hand circling rhythmically over his head.

Scared that he might seek to retain inordinate powers over the other nuns, and particularly in view of the younger novices, the convent as a whole acted swiftly in self protection. We did not want a Papa Doc regime to consolidate within the order.

Many of us have since suffered weird ailments, but we know we did what was correct at the time.

We wish Fabian well in his recovery and invite Sydney Star Observer readers to contribute to the cost of the Deprogrammers.

*Truthfully and
regretfully yours,
Sister Erzuli
Stanmore.*

Ed note: An anonymous note on religious newspaper, slipped under the door during the night, suggested we might receive letters on this affair which are not bona fide. We cannot accept; however, that members of a religious order would lie about such weighty matters and this regrettable correspondence is published in good faith.

LETTERS

The sad case of Mother

Dear Sister Editor,

It's always the good who suffer, isn't it, while the wicked seem to prosper? But nevertheless we can rally to defend those paragons of faith who walk amongst us.

Mother Inferior may have been demoted, but those loyal have renamed him Mother Despite.

Mother Despite... those overcome by sins of ambition, greed, envy and talentless anarchism. Mother Despite deserves the eternal respect of all the community due to his tireless efforts in humourously destroying stigmatic guilt.

Mother Despite... those who have brought the internal life of the Order into public disrepute. We are after all a religious sisterhood, not the federal Liberal party, or Tiananmen Square. We need to restore some dignity.

The silly ideas of progress propagated by those Vatican II dupes have a lot to answer for!

*Sister Marie Marcelle
Lefebvre
Sorority of Tradition
and Loyalty Order of
Perpetual Indulgence
(Underground)
Stanmore.*

verts attention from political issues and is a misunderstanding of political theatre. Misogyny is the term used for hatred of women. Dressing as nuns is the epitome of women-hating.

We are all nuns, nuns being women independent from men, or virgins (as derived from pre-Christian Egyptian language). However, nuns are the most oppressed sector of the Roman Catholic Church. In the middle ages, the only freedom from the confines of heterosexual society was to enter the convent. (Here women escaped sexual exploitation from men.) However, they lived under the direction of the Mother Superior who, in turn, received direction from the parish priest and higher patriarchy. Priests were not held to vows of celibacy, while often nuns were raped as a mockery of their vows of celibacy. Nuns are still being raped and murdered today. Their virginity is a challenge to men; their clothing presents a mystique to be violated (a challenge to certain men to violate what is beneath).

Your presence at demonstrations and other events takes away from the serious nature of the gathering and diverts attention from the issues. Your motto, "Get rid of the guilt," and your dedication to the "joy" of sexual liberation and sexual pleasures, your concern over artificial sex roles and (your concern over) a sexist church, as well as the pre-Christian societies which you have called "sex-positive," are all serious issues that should be dealt with in a serious manner.

In at least two instances in the past, the Sisters got the only press coverage the Lesbian and Gay community received from the national media. Would it not have been better to have received news coverage over the issues with which we were concerned? In demonstrations, we are there to express our anger accordingly, not with pom-poms but with fists in the air.

We find it ironic that you choose to dress as nuns to make your point about sexual liberation in view of the ancient definition and current practice. Dressing as nuns is a negative and ineffective way of expressing your inability to reveal the female side of your personality in a traditionally Roman Catholic family. Why nuns? Why not dress as priests or cardinals? Why not make a mockery of the oppressor?

Because it is entertaining as well as educational, political theatre is an effective way of pointing out issues to persons who may not be politically aware. If you wish, indeed, to bring "joy" back into sex within the gay movement, then practice political theatre which is not offensive to lesbians as women.

*Aline Burke, Lyn Freese and Pat Leslie
for Lesbians Against the Right
Toronto*

The Sisters respond:

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Toronto chapter, thank you for your thoughtful and reasoned letter. You have raised issues which are very important to our Order, and we hope that you will find this response useful.

The interrelationship of misogyny and homophobia is self-evident to most les-

Nasty habits

An Open Letter to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence:

Over the last year, Lesbians Against the Right has heard numerous complaints from other politically aware lesbians concerning the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. We are writing this open letter to explain our objections and protest your presence.

Prior to Lesbian and Gay Pride Day 1981, where you (as gay men dressed in nuns' habits) made your first public appearance, the decision was made not to permit you to perform or speak in an official capacity. Many lesbians would not have participated in the day had you been given a more active role.

This type of drag is misogynous, di-

blains but not to many gay men. High on our list of souls to save are the gay men unaware of their stake in feminism and the need for fundamental change in society; men self-oppressed by the ideologic byproducts of male privilege. However, it is necessary to mention that images traditionally associated with women are neither their exclusive property nor sacrosanct. If Dora Dyke can wear plaid shirts and work boots, then Freddie Faggot can wear slinky dresses. Do you protest the presence of Ladies Against Women, doing in various American cities essentially what the Sisters do? That is, exposing and denouncing the patriarchal, sexist and homophobic Christian Right.

It is because of the extreme sexual and political oppression of Christian nuns, among other reasons, that we have adopted this image. Our impact as priests, which you've suggested we portray, would be insignificant by comparison. (It would be shocking and enlightening, though, to run into a flock of lezzies in Roman collars.) This point is clear to the hundreds of people, gay/lesbian or het, politically astute or naïve, with whom we've enjoyed dialogue, and we cannot understand why it is lost on the writers.

We are proud to revive the ancient tradition of gay shamans who cross-dressed as one aspect of their spiritual leadership, and our habits identify us as a community of individuals committed to a bona fide spiritual/political mission. The dynamics of our internal community are characterized by conscientious nurturing of loving relationships and decisions taken by consensus, qualities largely absent from most political organizations. Perhaps the most important reason for our identification as nuns is personal: the ethos of gay male "sisterhood." This is something most gay men can relate to: not a tendency to transsexuality, but the most accessible definition for the tender relationships we have stolen for ourselves from a heterosexist society which

discourages affection between men.

We stand accused of diverting attention from "serious" political issues — an unfair charge. We are effective in attacking the attitudes responsible for our oppression, our intent being to complement the efforts of those working in a more conventional mode. We have reached many people who would have otherwise remained apolitical out of a disdain or distrust of "politicos." Not all community demonstrations are angry events; take for example the High Holy Day of Lesbian and Gay Pride. Even so, the Sisters play a constructive role in the recognition and expression of anger, as witnessed by the enthusiastic reactions of onlookers as we "hexed" Stew Newton and 52 Division and engaged in verbal confrontation with police officers. There's brimstone beneath the buffoonery!

It is regrettable that on some occasions the only coverage of a gay/lesbian event in the news media has been images of us. We were dismayed and outraged by the *only* newspaper coverage accorded Lesbian and Gay Pride Day 1981 — a photo in the *Toronto Sun* of some of the Sisters, accompanied by a cutline riddled with inaccuracies — not in any way representative of the event or of our community. However, the tendency of the media to concentrate on glamorous types like us is well known and not our responsibility. Also, it is hoped, even though our primary mission is to gay people, that the hets who encounter such iconoclastic messages will rethink their conception of the gay liberation movement, which is dominated in North America by the masculinist-faggot gay rights movement, to a large extent an implicitly separatist constituency.

Finally, we cannot accept your contention that we misunderstand political theatre. We have, in fact, expanded its scope and pertinence beyond that of most other agitprop groups. Since we do not *play* nuns, but *are* nuns (albeit self-ordained; why not?) we perform our political work continuously, not in discrete "pieces." And, after more than a year of public manifestations, sharing warmth and joy with others, risking (and suffering) verbal and physical attack, and growing as loving, androgynous, nun-identified nuns, both within our community and in our extra-convent relationships, we live as our convictions dictate.

We hope this exchange will be the beginning of a fruitful relationship between LAR and OPI, as we have many similar aims. Would you be interested, perhaps, in a jointly-sponsored Bingo Nite?

In love and struggle,
Basil Latham, Bill Dwyer, Billy Sutherland, Chris Davis, Sr Appassionata della Bawdyhouse, OPI, Harold B Desmarais, Hugh English, Nito Marquez, Paul Rees, and Ron VA Bennett,
The Sisters of The Order of Perpetual Indulgence,
Toronto

The Body Politic welcomes your letters. Send them to us at: Letters, TBP, Box 7289, Station A, Toronto, ON M5W 1X9.