DignityUSA and the Practice of Synodality in a Catholic Community:
A Submission to the Synod on Synodality

April 2024

In the document “Towards October 2024” released by the General Secretariat of the Synod in December 2023, there is a call for consultation with individuals and groups who have experience and expertise in Synodal activity. In the section “Some Suggestions for Organizing the Work,” we find the following statement:

…it will be important to involve people and groups that express a variety of experiences, skills, charisms, ministries within the People of God and whose point of view is of particular help in focusing on the ‘how’: e.g. ordained ministers (in particular parish priests); other pastoral leaders (e.g. catechists and leaders of grassroots communities and small Christian communities, particularly in some regions; leaders of pastoral offices); consecrated men and women; leaders of Lay Associations, ecclesial Movements and new Communities; people who hold positions of responsibility in Church-related institutions and organisations (schools, universities, hospitals, reception centres, cultural centres, etc.); theologians and canonists, etc.

As leaders of a lay association, we, the Board and Executive Director of DignityUSA, offer some reflections on having lived in and governed a Synodal Catholic organization for 54 years. As a group that has followed and participated in the Synod since the beginning, with prayer, deliberation, and hope, we believe that our experience can be among the gifts our church receives in this process.

Context

Dignity was founded in 1969 by an Augustinian priest, Father Patrick Nidorf, with the support of his Province, to address the needs of Catholic homosexual men and women struggling to reconcile their identities and their faith. After Father Pat was ordered to discontinue his ministry by a local Archbishop, about a year after the organization’s start, the work was taken up by a group of lay leaders.

Dignity’s birth coincided with a period of momentous change in the Catholic church. In the wake of Vatican Council II, lay involvement in church matters increased tremendously. Many of those who were part of Dignity’s early days had either been seminarians or were laypeople who closely followed church events, and many had educated themselves on theological matters as they sought ways to reconcile their sexual orientation with their faith. Dignity was among many lay associations that developed in this period and became part of the process of working through questions of authority and autonomy within the church.

The organization was also begun as a way for Catholic gay, lesbian, bisexual, and those we now recognize as transgender people who loved and valued their faith but who were unwilling to renounce their identities to find supportive spiritual community. Early communities were comprised of lay people and ordained ministers who believed they had a place in the church. They believed that they had a claim to the Catholic church’s social justice teachings, based on the oppression they experienced in nearly every sector of society: family structure, employment, civil rights, being subjected to violence and police
oppression. They met for prayer, for liturgy, for theological and Scripture study, and for discussion about how the church’s social justice situation applied to their lives. Over time, they began to engage in service programs, such as ministry to those in prison, volunteering at food pantries and meal programs, collecting gifts for needy children, and so forth.

Within a year of becoming a lay-led group, Dignity adopted a Statement of Position and Purpose. This document outlined the organization’s core beliefs, goals, and areas of concern. With very few amendments, most reflecting the expanding circle of what is now often called the Queer community, this Statement has remained essentially unchanged. The most significant amendment was adopted in 1987, when members of the DignityUSA House of Delegates (a legislative group with proportional representation from all Dignity communities) approved an explicit affirmation of intimate adult same-sex consensual relationships. This section was later amended by a vote of the full DignityUSA membership to include affirmation of people of diverse gender identities to live in the gender(s) with which they identify.

Some bishops banned Dignity communities from meeting in Catholic churches in their dioceses and forbade priests from presiding for liturgies sponsored by the group as early as the 1970s. Following the publication of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons in 1986, dozens of Dignity Chapters that had been meeting in Catholic churches were expelled in rapid succession. The organization was seen as dissenting from official church teaching, and denied access to any Catholic space—churches, convents, retreat centers, shrines, colleges, schools, etc. Most communities found hospitality in other denominational spaces, and, after grappling with the many impacts of this expulsion, adapted to being Catholics in exile. The number of bishops ordering priests not to provide care to Dignity communities also climbed sharply, meaning that since the late 1980s, most members of the organization no longer had regular access to priests in active ministry.

As a lay-led group for well over 50 years, and as essentially exiled Catholic communities for at least 35 years, DignityUSA and its members have had to figure out how to structure and govern ourselves, provide pastoral care and Catholic liturgy, manage finances, collaborate with other faith communities and social justice organizations, and manage our public presence, nationally and at the local level. We believe that many of the policies and practices we have developed and maintained offer examples of synodality that could be helpful to others in our church.

**Synodal Elements in DignityUSA and our Communities**

1. **Accountability to our members and those we serve.** Structures and policies developed to ensure accountability of leaders include:
   - Bylaws require that the majority of national Board members be elected by our members. People can be appointed to the Board to bring needed skills or representation, but the number of appointed members must always be less than the number of members elected by the membership.
   - Member election of the President and Vice-President. All slates for these offices must be gender diverse.
   - Provisions for the recall of any Board member.
• Offering an online Candidates Forum during each election cycle where members can hear from and question candidates for the Board. The forum is recorded and made available to all members.
• Annual membership meetings where the Board must provide programmatic and financial reports to the members and respond to questions posed by attendees.
• Ability of members to examine annual financial reports.

2. **Balancing national unity and local autonomy.** We strive for unity while recognizing the tremendous diversity of our members and communities. Dignity members represent an array of identities, ethnicities, ages, abilities, professions, relationships with Catholicism, political affiliations, etc. Local communities vary greatly in size, resources available, structures, and composition. We are bound by the DignityUSA Statement of Position and Purpose and require that all presiders be screened to ensure that they have no credible accusations of having sexually abused any minors. Beyond that, we honor each community’s choices around structure, governance model, activities, and models of worship and presidership. See “An Illustrative Story” below for a sense of how we achieved this agreement through a process of “Conversations in the Spirit.”

3. **Gender and Orientation Diversity in national governance and prayer.** DignityUSA’s bylaws require that there be gender diversity in our top leadership, the offices of President and Vice President. In addition, we strive to ensure that a range of identities are present on our Board. For national events, we use language with inclusive images of both God and humans, that avoids gender binaries whenever possible, and that avoids offensive characterizations. We strive for diversity in gender and ordination status in the leadership of prayer and worship during national events.

4. **Separation of governance and liturgical leadership.** In our communities, elected or volunteer lay-led governing boards or steering committees hold ultimate responsibility and authority for most community issues, including budget, programs, pastoral care, and public statements. In many, but not all, Dignity communities, a separate Liturgy Committee oversees liturgical life, including invitation to individuals to serve as liturgical presiders. The collaborative relationship between liturgists and governing bodies is a new way of experiencing Catholicism for many but is generally quickly embraced by new community members.

5. **Universal ownership of key documents.** Members of DignityUSA are given the opportunity to review and comment on any document that is considered a major, long-lasting statement on behalf of DignityUSA. An individual or team will have responsibility for a first draft, which is then reviewed and amended by the Board. The draft is then made available to the entire membership, with a timeline for feedback. A team reviews all comments submitted and presents a final draft and summary of comments to the Board, which approves the final document. Examples of documents in this category include:
   • Statement of Position and Purpose (amendments must be approved by a majority of members)
Each of these documents is made available on our organizational website.

In addition, press releases from DignityUSA are reviewed and approved by the President and at least one member of our Media Relations Committee, so that no official statement is the product of any single individual.

6. Continuous efforts to be more responsive and inclusive. Given the ongoing feedback loops, DignityUSA is frequently called to do better. We see ourselves as on a pilgrimage, with much to learn, and clarity that we have not achieved our goal. Most often, we find ourselves called to become more inclusive and more responsive to the needs of those who experience some degree of marginalization within our organization. DignityUSA has developed an internal network of caucuses for outreach, socialization, pastoral care, and social action. These caucuses are at various stages of mission and are organized around membership groupings such as young adults, women’s issues, transgender outreach, persons of color/racial justice, needs of our aging members, and families. The accountability we have established lies to every individual, not simply to the majority. We believe the Gospel and Catholic social justice teaching call us to prioritize minority voices and needs. This has meant we are continually learning how to minister with people with a variety of identities, responding to accessibility needs, considering how to center elements of our members’ cultural practices, etc. as ways of honoring the immense creativity of God.

An Illustrative Story

In the early 1990s, many in the Dignity community were struggling with what it meant to remain Catholic when most of us had been expelled from Catholic churches and many could not find priests in officially recognized ministry to preside at our liturgies. The ability to celebrate the Eucharist together had long been central to Dignity communities. How could we continue to do this in what was, for many, a situation they could never have envisioned for themselves or for our movement?

Some Dignity members were comfortable with having retired priests, married priests, or those who had left official ministry because of gay identities preside at Eucharist. Some believed only priests with valid current credentials should preside. Some felt that communities in exile were in extremis, and had the right, even the duty, to call forth presiders from within the community, regardless of gender, identity, or relational status. Some were asking Dignity to consider ordaining people on our own.

In the lead up to our biennial national conference in 1995, tensions around the question of how we lived Catholicism under the reality we faced began to boil over. At regional gatherings, there were intense arguments about these questions. Groups and communities with different beliefs about the way forward discussed offering motions to our national House of Delegates, which was, at the time, the policy-setting body for DignityUSA. The officers preparing to oversee the deliberative process realized that conflict over this question could lead to deep divisions, and even a rupture within the organization, and spent a great deal of time preparing for the national meeting.
After the introductory business of the House of Delegates was conducted, the President of the organization acknowledged the critical question facing the organization, the range of positions held by Delegates representing our Chapters, and the passions about what was right and wrong. She asked for the delegates’ permission to suspend the regular operating procedures, and to try a Conversations in the Spirit process. Delegates were divided into small groups, sent to breakout rooms, and asked to pray, listen deeply, and take time to consider each person’s input without response, and with a pause between each speaker. After everyone in the group had spoken, there was another period of silent prayer and reflection, and only then could there be responses. By the end of the first day, there was a recognition that, no matter what solution was being offered by an individual or community, it was in response to the same deeply felt longing to continue to practice our faith, and to experience the grace of our sacraments.

A small team, comprised of representatives from each of the breakout rooms, was charged with summarizing the key issues and proposing a way forward. They worked late into the night and brought a proposal to the full House of Delegates the following day. That proposal recognized that each Dignity community faced different realities, had different needs, and different resources available to them. It said that, on liturgical matters, each community should be supported in making its own decisions about who presides, and the type of service(s) offered. DignityUSA would not establish any type of ordination process. The proposal was adopted unanimously and has served our national and local communities well for nearly 30 years.

Conclusion

DignityUSA, like many other intentional Eucharistic Catholic communities and base communities, has worked to discern how to embed the core elements of our Catholic tradition with the reality of being, in many ways, extra-institutional. In the process, we have developed structures and practices that are responsive, flexible, adaptive, and based on personal and community responsibility. We offer these reflections on how we believe this work enables us to form community in ways consistent with the Gospel and central tenets of our faith and look forward to being in dialogue with others in church leadership about continuing this journey together.

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