

Queer and Catholic: A CLGS Oral History Project

Archival Identification:

Interviewer: Emma Cieslik

Interviewee: Sister Jeannine Gramick

Date of interview: August 17, 2022

Overview: Sister Jeannine Gramick (she/her) is a Sister of Loretto and a pioneer in ministry and outreach to and with LGBTQ+ Catholics. She was born in Philadelphia in 1942 and entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1960. She attended the University of Notre Dame and the University of Pennsylvania, where we received education through her PhD. At the University of Pennsylvania, she first met a gay Catholic man, Dominic Bash, who she coordinated masses for in homes and apartments in the area, which soon evolved in the Dignity chapter of Philadelphia. Along with Father Robert Nugent, a priest who was also involved in Dignity of Philadelphia and who has passed away in 2014, founded New Ways Ministry, an educational and pastoral ministry focused on welcome and support LGBTQ+ Catholics and their friends and families, in 1972. Her work with the ministry received support and positive feedback from across the United States but also received backlash from bishops and cardinals in the U.S. In this interview, Gramick shares the story of her life and ministry, along with the support and challenges accompanying her work with LGBTQ+ Catholics.

Keywords: New Ways Ministry, Father Robert Nugent, Dominic Bash, Bishop Mugavero, Bishop Gumbleton, Frank DeBernardo, Michael Judge, LGBT outreach, LGBT religious

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Cieslik: Wonderful!

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Cieslik: So, we're recording today. This is an interview conducted by myself, Emma Cieslik, on Wednesday August 17th, [2022] starting right about 6:02 PM Eastern Standard Time for Queer and Catholic, a CLGS Oral History Project. I use she/her pronouns. We are recording this oral history interview via Zoom, while sit at George Washington University on campus, and Sister Jeannine Gramick sits at her location via Zoom. I wanted to sincerely thank you for your time and for agreeing to contribute to this wonderful project. I really appreciate it.

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Gramick: Oh, you're most welcome.

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Cieslik: Thank you and starting off, would you mind please introducing yourself?

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Gramick: All right, I'm Sister Jeannine Gramick. I'm a Sister of Loretto. I have been a sister really for 60 years, and for 50 of those years, I have been involved in LGBT Catholic ministry. I began my religious life as at the School Sisters of Notre Dame for 40 years and had a little confrontation with church officials, so I, umm, changed communities. And now I'm a Sister of Loretto. I've been a Sister of Loretto for 20 years.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful. Would you mind sharing your pronouns with me?

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Gramick: She/her/hers.

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Cieslik: Wonderful, and along with that, you've mentioned that you've been very much involved in LGBTQ+ issues and identity. How do you identify?

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Gramick: Well, I don't usually identify. I mean for years I did not make my orientation public, mainly because Father [Robert] Nugent, who co-founded the organization [New Ways Ministry] with me, thought it would be better for various reasons, but he has passed away. He passed away in 2014 and actually the first, the only time I've made it public, is when I was--I don't remember what year it was. It probably was before the pandemic, so some time before 2019, close to 2019, I was in Poland and one of the people in the audience asked, and I replied that I was heterosexual. So that's my orientation and I'm not trans.

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Cieslik: Thank you so much for sharing. I really appreciate it.

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Gramick: Oh, you're only the second person who--the second time, I said that publicly.

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Cieslik: I really appreciate it.

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Gramick: You're welcome.

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Cieslik: Thank you and then along those lines as well. I'm curious when and where were you born?

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Gramick: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1942. Philadelphia is a very conservative city. Religiously it's most, even today and as I was growing up, it was the majority of the population was Catholic, very traditional Catholic and in many ways it is--the Catholic population is still traditional but coming, coming along. But I entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1960 as a traditional Catholic. But along came the Second Vatican Council [1962-1965] and that was really revolutionary and that revolutionized my life actually.

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Cieslik: Would you mind speaking more to that? How did it revolutionize your life?

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Gramick: Umm, well, I was in the convent in the novitiate. We had table reading in those days. You know, you would have your meals in silence, and there would be someone reading from a book, which was wonderful because you get to hear all these wonderful books, and we read a lot of books about the Second Vatican Council and for your viewers, or whoever is Catholic, would know that the Second Vatican Council was really revolutionary. It opened the Church to the world, the Catholic Church to the world. Before that there was this fortress mentality in which it was thought that if you are a Catholic, you know, you were somehow fighting the world, but the second Vatican Council, the bishops and the documents from Vatican II said: "no, we are part of the world and we need to go forth into the world and the world is good,"

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Gramick: and it emphasized, I think, the social justice aspect of the Church. The teaching had been there but not very prominent and so it became very prominent. Social justice became very prominent after Vatican II, and probably because of that the ministry thrived in the-- when I say the ministry, the LGBT ministry that I became involved in, which began in 1972, and I was meeting a lot of Catholics who didn't understand, and in those days we didn't say LGBT, we didn't even know there were transgender people, and we didn't say "gay or lesbian," we said "homosexual," but there were there were Catholics who recognized--the Catholics including my religious community leaders--who said that, "the Church has neglected this group of people, and they're part of the Church. We need to reach out and welcome them and make them feel part of the Church." So, I really credit Vatican II and the people of Vatican II who supported this ministry in the early days with the foundation of what has happened. That's wonderful.

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Cieslik: And along with that, I know you mention that there were some people that really spearheaded some of this work. Would you be able to identify who those people were related to your ministry?

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Gramick: Oh, related to the ministry? In 1972, well, the only people really that spearheaded the ministry before 1972 was a group called Dignity, which is an organization for LGBT Catholics and friends and families, and that started in 197--I'm sorry--1969 in the West Coast and the LA [Los Angeles]/San Diego [California] area, and a group of--they were men, gay men, approached a priest to have Eucharist, to have the Mass, and it became a weekly thing and then people began to hear about it, and it spread across the country. So, when I was at the university, which is where I met the gay Catholic community, I had heard about Dignity. There were chapters in--so this was 1972 that I heard about it, and it started in 1969, and in those three years, there were various chapters across the country.

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Gramick: So I and Father Nugent, who is the priest that I found a New Ways Ministry with, who has since died, he was very instrumental in starting a chapter of Dignity in Philadelphia

and when I left the university and moved to Baltimore to teach at the College of Note Dame of Maryland, I started the chapter of Dignity in Baltimore and helped to start one in Washington, D.C.. So anyway, that's--so the prior to my getting involved, really the only outreach was through Dignity, so thank God for Dignity.

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Cieslik: Most definitely. [chuckles] Thank you. I really appreciate you detailing that, and I know if you mentioned you were studying at university.

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Gramick: Yes.

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Cieslik: Where did you attend university?

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Gramick: I'm sorry, what did I?

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Cieslik: Where did you attend university?

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Gramick: Well, I got my master's degree at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, but then I got my PhD at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and I chose there--I could have gone to another university, but I was from Philadelphia, my parents were from Philadelphia, so I said I'm going to the University of Pennsylvania, so I can see my mom and dad and friends and cousins.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful, and I'm curious along the line of schooling. Where did you attend primary and secondary school in Philadelphia?

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Gramick: Well, if you were anyone from Philadelphia, if you say you're from Philadelphia and you're Catholic, you say well, what parish? So, I would say Saint Bartholomew's parish. I went to Saint Bartholomew's Grade School, and I went to Saint Hubert's High School in Philadelphia and then entered the convent.

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Cieslik: Wonderful! And I'm curious. One of my most exciting questions to ask you was what motivated you to join the specific community? I know--were compelled for any reason to join?

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Gramick: Well, I always knew that I was going to be a sister, a religious, from really the age of seven, and I--so in high school at Saint Hubert's, we had many different religious congregations of women. They were Sisters of Mercy, they were Franciscan Sisters, Sisters

of Saint Joseph. It was a huge high school. They were like almost 700 students in my graduating class, and there were like 3,000 in the whole school. It was huge! And the faculty was probably like 100 sisters of all these different orders, but there were two School Sisters of Notre Dame. But at any rate, each year I was going into a different community depending upon which sister I was friendly with, so when I was a freshman, I was going to be a Sister of Mercy because I liked my Latin teacher.

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Gramick: She was a Sister of Mercy, then as a sophomore, it was the Immaculate Heart Sister, but at any rate in my junior year and senior year, I had a history professor, well sister, and she was moderator of the debate club, and anyway I became very friendly with her, and so she was a Sister of School Sisters of Notre Dame. So, I said, all right, I'll become a School Sister of Notre Dame. It didn't matter to me really what community I was going to enter there. They're all doing good works. It was because of that friendship with her that I entered her community.

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Cieslik: Wonderful, that's great to hear, and I was really curious with that, I know you mentioned initially, that you grew up in somewhat of a traditional catholic community.

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Gramick: I did.

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Cieslik: What did you learn about LGBTQ identity in your early years?

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Gramick: Nothing! Nothing, no, I did not even know there were--well, as I said, the word in those days was "homosexual". I first heard the word "homosexual" at the University of Notre Dame when I was getting my master's degree, No, I take that back now that I recall. When I was a postulant, so we're talking about 1960, I first entered religious life, and there was another postulant who was--we used the term "very worldly." She knew what was happening in the world, and she told us: "oh, you know, before she entered the convent she would go to these homosexual clubs." Now I didn't know what the word "homosexual" meant, and I didn't want to ask because I didn't want to appear stupid. So, I never knew what that meant, but I heard the word. But then when I was doing my graduate work,

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Gramick: getting my master's degree at the University of Notre Dame, one of the sisters explained it to me, and so that's how, that's when, I came to know what being gay meant. I mean, it's incredible, but I lived a very sheltered, traditional, Catholic life. And probably in those days, I wasn't unique. I mean we're talking about the 1960s. Yeah, so it was 1968. I guess when I first knew what a homosexual person was and then in 1971, I met a gay man and his friends and changed the direction of my life.

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Cieslik: Would you mind hearing more about that? Who did you meet and how did it change things?

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Gramick: Well, I don't know if you want the long version or the short version.

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Cieslik: I always loved the long version if you have time.

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Gramick: Oh really? Okay. Well, the long version is that when I was a student, my first year as a student, graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, and you know nuns always like to save money, so I was looking for housing, and another student told me that there was an Episcopal priest and his wife and their two children who lived in this house, and they would give the attic of their house rent-free if the person would babysit when the husband and wife went out to any engagement, and so ooh, rent-free and all have to do is, you know, babysit, and their children were like five and seven, so they weren't babies, but someone to be with their children when they went out. So that's what I did my first year as a graduate student.

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Gramick: Now it happened that this Episcopal priest was at the Episcopal church on-campus, and the Episcopal church was letting the gay community have their church hall for dances, you know, and meetings. They were--the Episcopal diocese was engaged in outreach to the gay community, and this particular parish hall was used. So being curious, I asked the rector if I could, if there was some way I could like to go to--like it was totally voyeuristic, but he said, "oh well, you can sell cokes, you know, or the sodas at their dance." So, there I am in my veil, selling coke, and I just chatted and as it was a learning experience, and then this rector was also shortly thereafter this dance, they were going to have a liturgy, which is a mass,

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Gramick: and he said he would like to have an Episcopal priest and a Roman Catholic priest co-preside, and I knew Roman Catholic priests, so I got a Roman Catholic priest and Episcopal priest, and they co presided. Well at this liturgy afterwards someone comes up to me and said, "oh, I met you at the dance," and his name was Dominic Bash¹ and he told me

¹ Dominic Bash (1947-1993) was raised Catholic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He entered the Francisco brotherhood but left because of his sexual orientation, and then he became a hairdresser, owning the shop, The Abbey, providing free haircuts to nuns and free haircuts at homeless shelters. He was the co-founder in 1973 of Dignity of Philadelphia, and from 1980, he served as coordinator of the group's AIDS ministry. He also performed drag; his drag name was Madominic. In 1989, he tested positive for HIV, and in 1992, led the Philadelphia Pride Parade. He wrote a spiritual guide for men dying of AIDS, before passing away at age 46 from complications related to AIDS. For more information see: Ralph Cipriano. "Dominic Bash, Hairdresser who helped AIDS victims". *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan 27, 1993. Online at: <http://gayhistory.wikispaces.com/file/view/dominicbashobit.pdf>, and at <http://articles.philly.com/1993->

his story, which he didn't tell me, at the dance. But after the liturgy, we had this long conversation and he said how he had been in the Franciscans for a short while, knew he was gay for well, from the time he was probably five or six or seven, very young, but went into the Franciscans but stayed a very brief time because he said he felt, or I don't know if he was told--anyway he left because he was gay,

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Gramick: but he was very devout, very devout Catholic, and he said he knew other Catholics, gay Catholics, who would love to come to a liturgy such as he had just experienced. He wasn't shy at all, but his, his friends, his gay friends were shy, thinking they were Catholic, and they could no longer be welcomed in the Church. So, I said: "well, let's have a mass at your apartment for your gay friends," and that's what we did and we had weekly liturgies at his home and then it grew. Some other people wanted it at their apartment, but it was for the lesbian--in those days, as I said, it was the lesbian and gay Catholic community, and that ultimately became the Dignity chapter in Philadelphia.

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Gramick: Yeah, So that's the story of Dominic, wonderful, wonderful man. It's to him that I owe my life and all that has transpired, he was the inspiration. But there are many people on the way who nurtured it. Certainly, my religious superiors. I don't like to use that word, "superior." We call them leaders, but then the German contingent doesn't like the word leader because of Fuhrer, or at any rate, my religious leaders were, as I said, were very forward-looking women, and they appointed me to the ministry after I, well after I got my degree, and I taught for several years and when the community had another sister getting her PhD who could take my place in the math department, then I was assigned to full-time LGBT ministry.

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Cieslik: Wonderful! What year was that you were assigned to the ministry?

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Gramick: 1977.

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Cieslik: Wonderful!

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Gramick: And that's when New Ways Ministry started, and I started it with Father Nugent, who was the priest, the main priest, because we had several, but who was the main priest who said mass for the lesbian and gay community in Philadelphia?

01-27/news/25960643 1_aids-victims-dignity-s-aids-unconditional-love.; Angela Bonavoglia. *Good Catholic Girls: How Women Are Leading the Fight to Change the Church*. New York: Regan Books, 2005: 149.; Chris Bartlett. "Dominic Bash - Sticks and Stone Queer Memoir". *The Rotunda*, 7/20/2010. Online at: www.scribd.com/doc/34822837/Dominic-Bash.

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Cieslik: Was he the individual who said mass at the different apartments around the community?

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Gramick: Yes, um-hmm, yes, as I said there were other priests, but he was the main one.

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Cieslik: Wonderful.

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Gramick: I have to tell you a story about that.

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Cieslik: Oh good!

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Gramick: It's a good story, Dominic, Dominic, indomitable, and he got so much done because, as I said, he was not afraid to come to this liturgy that was con-celebrated with Roman and Episcopal priests, and even though he was gay, was very, very open and he said that--he arranged--he'd probably arranged for this and he told me when it was coming, but he arranged to have an interview with the major newspaper in Philadelphia about gays, you know, and the convent. At any rate, after this newspaper article came out in conservative Philadelphia in 1972, there were a couple of dozen letters. Now the people did not write letters to the editor, they wrote letters to me, but they sent it to the newspaper, and the newspaper then forwarded the letters to me, so I got a couple of dozen letters, and for the most part there were only a few that were negative.

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Gramick: Most of the letters supported what I was doing and said: "this is so good, I'm glad you're doing it. This is what the church needs," and among those letters was one from a priest named Father Robert Nugent, and Father Robert Newton closed his letter by saying: "if there's anything I can do, please let me know." So, I called him, or I don't I called, he probably gave his phone number, and anyway, I contacted him and I said yes, you can be a celebrant for the gay community. So that's how he got involved, and then when he tells that story, when he used to tell the story, he would say, and I've never used those words again, "if there's anything I can do, let me know." See what he got into, but no, he was happy to do it.

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Cieslik: I'm so glad to hear it, and along those lines, what was the year that the newspaper article came out. Do you remember?

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Gramick: Yup, it was 1972 because it was [19]71 when I met Dominic, and so this was-- yeah, the newspaper article came out in seventy--I have a copy of it. I could probably send that to you if you want, but anyway it was [19]72.

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Cieslik: Wonderful, that would be wonderful. I would love to read it.

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Cieslik: Okay. And then, along with that, I know circling back to, I was really curious, you had mentioned that you first asked the question and got up the courage to ask the question of what a homosexual was or who that was for a specific sister in the community. What did you first learn?

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Gramick: Well, I don't even remember. She wasn't in my community. It was at Notre Dame. We were both students at Notre Dame, and Notre Dame was having--well, they had films like every week. It was wonderful. I mean you could see all these foreign films or needn't be foreign, but all these wonderful films and one of the films was, I think, about homosexuals and I didn't know what that was. So, I asked her, but you know, I don't even remember what she said. She probably said it's you know, umm, men who are romantically involved with other men and women who are romantically involved with other women. Yeah, I don't remember. [Laughs]

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Cieslik: No worries, [laughs] and I was curious--along with that, I know that you've mentioned a little bit more about New Ways Ministry, would you mind sharing more about the experience looked like of founding that and what that ministry looked like taking shape?

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Gramick: Well, it started actually because Father Nugent and I were both working in 1976, the year before we started New Ways Ministry, at a Catholic Peace and Justice Center in Washington, D.C., in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., called the Quixote Center, and they dealt with any social justice issue, and realizing that both Father Nugent and I had experience, pastoral experience, with lesbian and gay people. At one of our staff meetings, they proposed, well, maybe the Quixote Center should take on as a project social justice toward lesbian and gay people, so Bob Nugent and I proposed that we start these New Ways workshops is what we called them. We took the word, "New Ways," because in that year, 1976, Bishop Mugavero from Brooklyn had written a pastoral letter called "Sexuality: God's Gift.

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Gramick: And in that letter, he talked about the need for the Church to find new ways to bring the truth of Christ to lesbian and gay people. So, we said, yes, we need new ways to do this, so Bob and I devised a one-day educational workshop for Catholics, and so that's what we did. And then, after doing this for a year at the Quixote Center, it was just one of the things at the Quixote Center, we said, "well, we think we should have a full-time ministry on this issue," and so we started New Ways Ministry so that we could devote full-time to this educational ministry. And it is an educational ministry. I mean there, there's pastoral aspects to it of course, you never neglect the pastoral, but we believed, and I still believe, that we

need to change structures in society and in the Church, and I think the way to do that is to try to educate people, to see the need for the change of structure. So, it's an educational ministry. Yes, so that was how it started as a full-time ministry, so that was in 1977.

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Cieslik: What did some of those educational programs look like, and who were they for?

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Gramick: Well, they were for anyone who wanted to come, but they were advertised in the Catholic community, and I remember the first one that was at Holy Name College here in Washington, D.C. We had protestors--two traditional Catholics who showed up, who told--who demanded to see the rector to say that this should not be, it should be cancelled, and the rector promptly asked them to leave the facility. But at any rate--so those early workshops talked about research that had been done. A lot of questions that people had in those days were, "well, is homosexuality an illness?" People thought it was--you know, well this was after--well, we used the American Psychological Association's and the APA's information, but that was a question.

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Gramick: And what causes it? Are you born that way? What makes you homosexual? Okay. What does the Bible have to say? You know, about homosexuality, and what about the sexual teachings of the Church? The sexual ethics, you know? So, they were--and then we introduced other research about homophobia, so it was trying to give people information. Well, give information in the presentations and then we would have people break-out into small groups for discussion, to talk about their experience. And yeah, that was basically it. Presentations, small group discussion and large group discussions, and it was a day-long workshop, and we took this workshop around the country, so that well, it took a couple of decades. But we touched maybe three-fourths of the diocese in the country with these workshops.

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Gramick: So, we were very pleased, and so they were for anyone who wanted to come, but mainly the Catholic community, and we would have lesbian and gay people come. We never had anyone identify as trans. We had parents who had lesbian or gay children, we had teachers who presumably were, you know, they didn't--well, some did identify as heterosexual, but you know, you weren't asked for your sexual orientation. Teachers, school personnel, like those who were in administration, just Catholics across the board.

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Cieslik: Yes, and I'm curious, how did people respond to the educational workshops? I know you mentioned that there were a few protesters, but how did attendees respond?

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Gramick: Very positively. They were--those that didn't know much, were glad for the information. Those who already knew the information, were very happy to hear it reinforced, I would say, in the like, the 20 years that we went around the country with these workshops--

you know, I mentioned that the very first one had had protesters, but I could count on my one hand fewer than five incidents in which we had protests, and sometimes we'd have people who came to the workshop where you could tell they were protesting, but they were civil, and they would sit there and ask questions and we would engage in rational discussion. And that was good. That was good. But you know, the few times there were agitators [chuckles] who weren't interested in discussing at all,

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Gramick: but that was the minority of people. But I should also say that there was disagreement, and the people maybe didn't come to the workshop, but they came to my religious superiors, and my religious superiors received more complaints than I did, and so they did the ministry for me. They were doing the ministry too, I shouldn't say for me, they were also doing the ministry, and I was just with one of my former superior generals a few weeks ago. We had a lovely conversation and I said: "Pat, do you remember the time when you were telling me about this woman who called you on the telephone and was ranting and raving because she heard me on the radio talking about the ministry and you know, I asked you, 'Well, what was her problem?"

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Gramick: What was she concerned about?" And she said, "well, honestly, I think she was just upset that you were talking about the issue. [Laughs] That's all it was. You shouldn't be talking about this issue," but so my religious congregational leaders had to bear the brunt of a lot of protests and one time at a different, another provincial, not Pat, but Sister Ruth Marie May, who was--they all were supporting this 100%, and she called me and she said--well, I guess I was with her. I saw her and she said: "Jeannine, I got a call from the cardinal." I said, "oh!" And he was upset because somebody called him [Laughs], and he told me that I should take away your faculties, the faculties is a--that's a term that's used for clerics. It's permission that a bishop gives to a priest to say mass or hear confessions, or you know,

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Gramick: dispense the sacraments in the diocese. They give them faculties. And so, she said, Ruth Marie said to the cardinal, she said: "cardinal, I can't take away her faculties because she doesn't have any." [Laughs] So that's that was very good. And then another time she said to me, this is the same provincial, Ruth Marie. She said, "well, a lady complained because she said you were in a gay bar." Now, I'd like to know first of all how she knew I was in the gay bar. Was she there? At any rate, I said, "oh yes, yes, I was doing a study." Well, I was getting participants for the study, but at any rate I said, "of course I was in the gay bar. I was trying to get people to tell them about this study and also to invite them to come to Dignity." This is when--it was before I had started New Ways Ministry, and I had started a Dignity chapter in Baltimore. Yes, they had to defend me, and they did.

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Cieslik: I'm so glad.

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Gramick: Yes, they did. All of them did, and I went through, I don't know, probably four or five provincials, and three or four superior generals, and every one of them defended me, even to the Vatican, because the Vatican complained too, but--.

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Cieslik: Would you mind sharing more about that? I know that's somewhat of a recent development, but I would love to include it in the interview.

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Gramick: It's not really that recent. The Vatican started their complaints because of Cardinal Hickey. Well, he was the bishop in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s, and so this is going to be another long story. He had a meeting with my provincial. Well, the protocol is that when there are sisters in a diocese, they meet with the bishop once a year or whatever to talk about the sisters in the diocese, and we had--when I was a School Sister of Notre Dame, this is like early 1980, probably 1982 or 1983, somewhere around there, and we had about 30 School Sisters of Notre Dame in the Archdiocese of Washington. They were all teachers except me. I was doing my New Ways Ministry, and she told me, my provincial told me, that he spent--she was with him for an hour,

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Gramick: and he spent like 55 minutes talking about me, and he could not understand why I was in this ministry, and he went on and on and on about I shouldn't be in this ministry, and he said, you know, "I, the archbishop, I did not assign her to this ministry," and my provincial said: "well, archbishop, we, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, we assigned her to this ministry," and he wanted her to reassign me, and no, she did not assign me. So, then he went to the Vatican to complain. So, then the Vatican approached the superior general at the time, who was Mary Margaret, yeah at that time, and the Vatican asked the School Sisters of Notre Dame to investigate me and to recommend sanctions. And so, they investigated me by talking with me, and you know, "what are you doing,"

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Gramick: and you know giving me, you know, I had to give explanations, and so there they responded to the Vatican that, "yes, we investigated Sister Jeannine, and we recommend no sanctions." Now this happened three times. The Vatican asked the community to investigate me and recommend sanctions. Oh, the first one [Superior General] was Mother Georgian, and then Mary Margaret, and yeah, so there were a number of superior generals, and then it was Pat Flynn, but at any rate, three times. But after not getting the answer that they wanted, after three tries, the Vatican appointed their own commission, and that Vatican Commission, there's a whole story there, but everything is too long--the result of the Vatican commission was that in 1999, the Vatican issued a notification and at that time the notification,

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Gramick: the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict [XVI], and so Cardinal Ratzinger, as the prefect

of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued this notification, it was signed by Pope John Paul II, saying that "Father Nugent and I should no longer be involved in this ministry. We should leave the ministry." So, I took a year of discernment because frankly the commission was very skewed, and well, I'll just give you one example. We had meetings with the Vatican, this Vatican Commission, and we had letters of support from, I would say, 18, more than a dozen, but less than two dozen bishops where we had gone around the country, and we entered them into the proceedings of the hearings,

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Gramick: but they were --we found out they were not sent to the Vatican. They were not entered as testimony on our behalf. That's just one example I can give others, but that's an egregious example of how the commission was not fair at all, in my opinion. So, at any rate I was hoping that there would be a reassessment, you know, and thousands of people all across the globe, because it made international news, Catholic News, wrote to the Vatican complaining about this situation. Well, rather than initiating another hearing, the Vatican just told the School Sisters of Notre Dame, my community and Father Nugent's community, that this has to stop. No more letters. So, I was called. Well, we were both called to Rome, to our respective communities,

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Gramick: and told that we must, and this came, unfortunately, from the School Sisters of Notre Dame--but I think they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't do it. They were not told to do it, but they were advised to do it by canon lawyers, and so they were advised that if I did not obey and cease and desist and write no more, speak no more--because I had been speaking about the Vatican commission, not doing the ministry, the workshops, but speaking about what I had experienced in this commission. So, if I did not cease that I would be ultimately expelled from the community. And I knew this was heart wrenching for the community because they had supported this work all along and they said, you know, stop and then after a little while you can continue.

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Gramick: Well, that was a little "pie in the sky," so I transferred to another community. I transferred to the sisters of Loretto, so that injunction from the School Sisters of Notre Dame, which they felt they had to do, no longer applied to me. But then the Vatican started writing to the sisters of Loretto, but the Sisters of Loretto, they got nine letters in the course of a number of years, but they answered them politely, you know, and I remained a Sister of Loretto. They didn't, they didn't--they supported me.

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Cieslik: I'm glad.

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Gramick: And then we have Pope Francis, and then the letters stopped, and then Pope Francis is congratulating me for my 50 years in the ministry. So, it's a whole new, whole new ballgame. [Overlapping voices]

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Cieslik: Oh, go ahead, I don't want to cut you off.

00:45:02

Gramick: No, no, I'm finished. I talk too much, go ahead.

00:45:05

Cieslik: No, no, I love hearing all of your story. It is very important to the interview, so feel free if you have more to say.

00:45:11

Gramick: No, it's your turn, I forget what I was going to say.

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Cieslik: [Chuckles] And along those lines, I was curious: what year did you receive the letter of injunction from the Sisters of Notre Dame?

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Gramick: Umm, 2001. No, no, wait--1999 was the notification from the Vatican, and I spent--that was like July of [19]99, and I spent a year going around the country talking about the hearings that we had and how unfair they were and asking people if they thought it was unfair to write and ask for another hearing. But the Vatican didn't like that, and so it was 2000, May of 2000, almost nine months, like having a baby, [chuckles] that then the School Sisters of Notre Dame put that injunction on me. So, then I spent the next year going to the Sisters of Loretto. Tn the Loretto process, there's a year of visiting Loretto communities to see what they're like, to see you now, to see if you would like them and they would like you. So, the next year was travelling to different Loretto communities,

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Gramick: and of course, they would ask about the ministry and an opportunity to talk about LGBT issues, and the Loretto community was very progressive, so they were on board. In fact, the Loretto community--I was visiting them like 2000, end of 2000 and 2001, but in 1985, they had given--I think it was [19]85--they had given me an award for the ministry that I was doing. So they were already on board, and at any rate, so then I transferred--the formal transfer was in 2001, but canonically, there's a three-year period, so it became final in 2004. So, that's the sequence of years. But as Loreto, of course, I continued to work at New Ways Ministry and educational works, and we also at New Ways Ministry do pastoral outreach too because we have retreats for LGBT people. We have retreats for parents. We have, well, we have not retreats, but well, I guess they're educational for schools, yes, that would be education. We have retreats for gay priests and retreats for lesbian sisters.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful. How did those get started? I'm curious to ask.

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Gramick: Well, let's see. The retreats for parents got started because parents were asking. We knew parents individually, and they said, "we'd love to have a retreat." So, we set up a retreat,

and I think the first one we had Bishop Gumbleton² as the retreat leader, and he was wonderful. His story has been told, and there are a couple of books out and new ones coming out about Bishop Gumbleton. I don't know if you know that name.

00:49:04

Cieslik: A very well-known and well-loved name.

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Gramick: Okay, so he gave the first retreat and so the retreat for parents started because they were asking for it. The retreats for Lesbian sisters began because a lesbian sister--well, I had lesbian sisters writing to me from different parts of the country and I would put them in touch with other lesbian sisters so that they don't feel alone. And then, there started to be a network in different cities, and finally the network--I don't remember actually how it, the first--well, at any rate, somehow [Laughs] in 2000, we had a workshop. It wasn't a retreat, it was a workshop for lesbian sisters and congregational leaders like the mother superiors and formation and vocation directors, and the reason for bringing those constituencies together is the lesbian sisters would feel support from leaders--might not be their community leader,

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Gramick: they might not be out in their community--but these leaders who came here were supportive and then the support of--the leaders would learn more how to be--how to move the issue, I guess, educationally in their own communities. So, we began to have those yearly--they were yearly--meetings and they were workshops. But then--after it's been pretty recently, it was before COVID, but maybe 10 years later, the lesbian sister said, "we love meeting with the leaders, but we'd also like to get together with just lesbian sisters." So, I guess maybe around 2010 or 2012, something like that, we began to have a retreat just for lesbian sisters, but they still continue, like we had the last March, this past March [2022], we had the workshop for all the constituencies and next year, we'll have a retreat just for lesbians sisters.

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Cieslik: That's wonderful.

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Gramick: Yup.

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Cieslik: And I'm curious, what year did those retreats, and those workshops start?

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Gramick: Well, see, I'd have to go back into my computer, and look at the files [chuckles] and look at the brochures. I don't--I can't I know. I know the first--it was around 2000, that was the first time that we had the sisters and congregational leaders, and for the most part we've been meeting at the Racine Dominicans Retreat House, outside of Milwaukee

² For more information see: Feuerherd, Peter. *The Radical Gospel of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton*. Orbis Books, 2019.

[Wisconsin]--Siena [Retreat] Center. That's been the home, not for all but for most, of these workshops and retreats, but they've been in different parts of the country. We had one in California. We had one in Philadelphia. We had one in Ohio, but mostly we've been outside of Milwaukee. And recently, right before the pandemic, there--we had a retreat there for priests, and it was--there were picketers and protesters, and then when they found out we were having, like in a few months, we're having one for the sisters. They picketed and protested the sisters, but these were the people that didn't want to be--you couldn't engage in conversation with, so yeah.

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Cieslik: I see.

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Gramick: Pardon?

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Cieslik: I was mentioning, I see. I'm really curious. I know you speak--you spoke originally about retreats with Bishop Gumbleton. Would you mind sharing more about what those retreats looked like, especially supporting parents?

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Gramick: Well, again, I would have to go back, and look at the brochures and see the schedule, but Father Nugent and I were not the retreat leaders. We would get, like Bishop Gumbleton or some other people, to lead the retreat. So essentially the retreats were similar to what we did in the in the workshop, meaning there were talks, there were presentations that the leader would make. There would be small group discussion by the parents. There were--a big part of it would be the parents getting up. Each parent would get up and tell their story about their, their child and how they dealt with it either well or badly, and some, you know, had conversions and they felt terrible, but I think for the most part, in my recollection they dealt with it very loving,

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Gramick: and any reservations they had, they held back from their son or their daughter because they didn't want them, you know--they didn't want to burden them. But they brought their burdens, you know, to the retreat and their burdens were, "well, I am so grieved because my gay son doesn't go to church anymore or my lesbian daughter," and I would say for about 10 years, this was their lament. That was like the [19]90s, in the 19[90s], and then I saw a change like around 2000, in the turn of the century, the parents would say: "well, heterosexual son can get married in the Church. Why can't my lesbian daughter get married in the church?" [Chuckles] So now they were saying: "what's wrong with this Church" not, "what's wrong with my child because they're not going to church, but what's wrong with this church?" Yeah, so that was very interesting,

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Gramick: and the parents were pillars of the church. I mean they were people in the parish who you know were in all of the, you know, sodalities, they would be the people who would

stay after Sunday, collect and count the collection, you know, in the basket. I mean they were devoted members of the parish. They would be the secretaries or volunteers in the parish. They were very connected to the parish and so yeah, now they're saying: "you know, what's wrong with this Church?" [Chuckles]

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Cieslik: And I'm curious, along with that, were any of the parents involved in PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]? With any local chapters?

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Gramick: Oh, yes! Absolutely, especially--well, I guess not especially--a lot of them, but I'm thinking of the Philadelphia chapter of our parents, we called it our Catholic Parents Network, was started by Catholic parents who had initially gone to PFLAG, and then they found out, "oh, but there were something that was Catholic." So, they came, so they called our Catholic Parents Network, they said, "well, that's the Catholic PFLAG. Yeah, they would go to PFLAG, and get the Catholic parents to come to the Catholic Parents Network. [Laughs] So yeah, and we encouraged the parents to form not only a network--we had base network in Philadelphia, but there were networks in other places. In particular, parents in Rochester, [New York] Mary Ellen and Casey Lopata, and they had great support from their diocese, and they started a family ministry in the diocese of Rochester, and that we encouraged them to make it a national ministry for parents and that grew into a Catholic parents group nationally.

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Cieslik: Wonderful. Do you know when that was found?

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Gramick: Not off the top of my head.

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Cieslik: No worries, no worries.

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Gramick: [Chuckles] But I would say in the late [19]90ss, but I mean if you want the exact dates, I can check them for you.

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Cieslik: Thank you, [chuckles] no worries for the interview.

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Gramick: Okay.

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Cieslik: And along with that, you've done a wonderful job of talking about how modern events and historical events have really impacted the ministry, and one of the questions I want to ask was: how did the HIV and AIDS epidemic impact your ministry?

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Gramick: Well, it impacted the ministry in two ways. I guess there was the prong that was reaching out to people with AIDS, and there were a lot of AIDS ministries started, and there was a Catholic AIDS ministry started by a sister and I don't know if he was a priest or a brother--I can't remember--in the [19]80s, but then there was also a group of Catholics who, and we've heard it, who were saying: "well, this is God's punishment, you know, for AIDS. I mean, God's punishment to gay people." At any rate, the bishops wrote two beautiful pastoral letters on AIDS, and saying this is not God's punishment at all. This is a disease, and we have to work to eradicate this disease, and we have to reach out to these, to these individuals, so the way though it impacted New Ways Ministry is we would--

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Gramick: we did not do direct AIDS ministry, although we wrote a publication, like the Stations of the Cross, for people with AIDS, but we would steer them, I guess, to the Catholic AIDS ministry and we would continue to do our educational LGBT work. So, I guess it had, you know, the positive effect of bringing more people into our ministry and then a little negative effect, but those are the people. I don't know that you're going to reach them at all. [Chuckles] I don't know. I have hope. I have hope. I shouldn't say that. I do have hope.

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Cieslik: I hope so too, but you're very true. It's a very sad, unfortunate event, but I'm glad your ministry was there. You mentioned a Stations of the Cross, what did that look like?

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Gramick: Well, it took each of the 14 Stations of the Cross and did like a little meditation on each station and focused it on people with AIDS. And so, in one of our pilgrimages, we--that was another thing, we did pilgrimage to various Christian sites, and the very first pilgrimage was to the Holy Land, and in Jerusalem, we did the Stations of the Cross and we used that booklet at each station and prayed with the prayer there, so yeah.

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Cieslik: I'm curious, what did the pilgrimages look like? When did those first start?

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Gramick: Probably around the late [19]90s, maybe 1997, maybe that was the first one, and basically, we went to holy sites, and we would have mass each morning, and then go to the pilgrimage. Let's say, let's say, it was the Holy land, so we would go to the Mount of Beatitudes, you know one day, another day to the Sea of Tiberius, and recall the Gospel stories, you know, connected with those places, or go to Capernaum and see the place where allegedly this was Peter's house, you know, Capernaum. So, we would go to these Christian sites, and we had a guide, a tour guide, who would give us information, archaeological information, and we would pray there. And then in the evening, we would have a reflection period of like, what did they mean to you know? Let's bring that to prayer and share some of the responses that you had to the day, so yeah, and we went to different--I just detailed the Holy Land, but we went to Germany and oh, Spain, France, Greece, you know different

places. Like in Greece, we would do in the footsteps of Saint Paul, where he went, but anyway.

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Cieslik: And I'm curious who went on these trips. Was it people that were involved at the ministry workshops?

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Gramick: Well, maybe we don't--we have a mailing list, and we would just advertise it to the mailing list and tell them to tell their friends and anyone who wanted to come could come. It was for LGBT Catholics and their families and friends.

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Cieslik: Wonderful!

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Gramick: But we haven't had any pilgrimages since COVID [COVID-19 pandemic], no.

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Cieslik: Along those lines, I'm curious how has COVID impacted your ministry?

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Gramick: Well, it has impacted in--I don't know if I should say negative ways by shutting down some of the things like we did like the pilgrimage but opened up opportunities through Zoom so that while we were going around the country, doing workshops with Zoom, we did workshops with people in the Philippines, a Catholic college and university there. We did workshops with people in Brazil, and we've had Zoom presentations in which we have people from all over the world zooming in, like we've done celebrations of pride for Pride Day, and so they come from all over the world to celebrate Pride, so in one sense, it has increased the ministry and broadened it to people that would not have been able to physically attend. It has its benefits, so every cloud has a silver lining.

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Cieslik: Very true.

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Gramick: Yeah.

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Cieslik: I was curious I know earlier you had mentioned how the transition from Pope Benedict to Pope Francis affected your ministry. What effect did that look like?

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Gramick: Well, the biggest effect is that we have been in correspondence with Pope Francis, and that has opened up doors to people who may have felt a little intimidated by us because of the sanctions from the Vatican on Father Nugent and myself. Well, the sanctions on Father Nugent and myself came in 1999, but also New Ways Ministry itself, because News Ways

Ministry is bigger than me--I should say bigger than I--because we have, you know, other people here: director, associate director and spirituality director, et cetera, et cetera. But in 2010, I believe it was, the US bishops came out with a statement against New Ways Ministry, not against Father Nugent or me, but against the organization, and that was basically because Frank DeBernardo,

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Gramick: who was the executive director [of New Ways Ministry], and I were testifying for marriage equality. I mean, to put it in a Catholic context, I mean, we would say testifying for civil unions for LGBT people. Not marriage, but civil unions. And so, in 2010, the bishops, the U.S. bishops, the President of the U.S. Bishops Conference, said that we could no longer be considered a Catholic organization because we were encouraging or fostering or supporting these civil unions. Well, Frank DeBernardo, last year, well 2021, he got to thinking, and we should have maybe thought of this sooner, but he said: "you know, we were condemned by the U.S. bishops for testifying for gay rights, you know for civil marriage, and Pope Francis, when he was in Argentina,

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Gramick: also advocated civil unions for same-sex couples, so here is the pope, well before he was even pope, advocating for civil unions, and we did the same thing, and we get condemned for it." [Chuckles] So we wrote to Pope Francis and explained everything. We explained in great detail about the CDF [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] sanction on me and Father Nugent and we explained about the U.S. Catholic bishops condemning the organization, and he wrote us a beautiful letter, and so, since then, we have been corresponding with him, and he likes what we are doing.

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Cieslik: Wonderful!

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Gramick: Yeah.

01:09:35

Cieslik: Did that in any way change what the Conference of Bishops said or their ruling?

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Gramick: Uh, no, because if you know Catholic politics--

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Cieslik: Yes. [Chuckles]

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Gramick: [Laughs] I mean it is amazing that Pope Francis has issued an apology to the indigenous people in Canada. You know, and he is absolutely wonderful--but it is not usual for any Catholic bureaucracy to say we made a mistake or to rescind what they said. The way it's dealt with is you ignore what happened in the past and you go on as if it never happened. So that's what we're experiencing. So, there's going to be no taking the Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith which issued this decree is not going to take it back and the U.S. bishops, I know, are not going to say we made a mistake, but you just proceed as if it didn't happen. And now what we say is, "but Pope Francis likes what we're doing, and you know he has--we have his letters to say that," so that makes it easier. Yup.

01:11:14

Cieslik: And along-- [overlapped voices] Go ahead.

01:11:16

Gramick: Well, no, I was just looking at the time. I don't know how long you had anticipated this interview to be.

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Cieslik: They're typically between an hour and an hour and 30 minutes and 45. If you have any time constraints, that's totally fine.

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Gramick: Okay.

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Cieslik: But I always like to get a really round picture of everything.

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Gramick: Okay, all right, you can continue then for a little while more. [Laughs]

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Cieslik: Wonderful, let me know when you have to go. No, no worries.

01:11:42

Gramick: Well, I would say like an hour and a half. How long have we been? I mean, look at--my clock is up there [points to upper right corner].

01:11:50

Cieslik: It works perfect. It's about 15 more minutes if that works for you.

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Gramick: Okay.

01:11:55

Cieslik: Wonderful! And one of my questions is really thinking--

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Gramick: I mean we could continue, but like, I'm just fading.

01:12:02

Cieslik: No worries, no worries. I think I only have one more question. That would be, and then we can close it up.

01:12:09

Gramick: Okay.

01:12:09

Cieslik: No, I don't want to push it all.

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Gramick: Okay.

01:12:11

Cieslik: What do you see as the future of New Ways Ministry moving forward and the future of LGBT identity in the Catholic Church?

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Gramick: Well, the future of New Ways Ministry, I think is quite bright, and I think we will continue to have more influence in the Catholic community. What I envision way down the line, and I will not be here to see it and I think the people involved in New Ways won't be here to see it, but we have--what I envision is that there will be no need for New Ways Ministry or for Dignity or for the Catholic Parents Network. You know, like it shouldn't be a big issue, but we have a long way to go because, like, I think right now the issue is the trans issue in the catholic community. I think, by and large, Catholics have accepted lesbian and gay people. I mean, if you look at the opinion polls, well over 75% of Catholics support civil rights, even civil marriage.

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Gramick: They're not supporting sacramental marriage yet, but civil marriage, and that, I think, is due to the fact that so many lesbian and gay Catholics have come out to their families and their families realize these are the people I love, and they're still the same people, whether they're heterosexual or gay or lesbian. It doesn't matter, but now the big issue, I think, is the trans issue. And there are some very courageous transgender Catholics coming out, but there are fewer and far between, and that's the issue I think that we have to grapple with now. But long term, like my vision is that we won't need--there is an organization called Trans Catholic started by a wonderful trans woman who's a friend of ours--but at any rate, the long-term vision is that we won't need any of these organizations,

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Gramick: that that we will be the Church that Jesus envisioned, the Church that accepts everyone, no matter what your gender, no matter what your sexual orientation, no matter what your gender identity is or your gender expression, like we are flowers in God's beautiful garden. But the simple answer to your question "what do I envision for the future for New Ways" is that it will just be easier because of Francis's support.

01:15:06

Cieslik: That's wonderful.

01:15:08

Gramick: So, we have a new booklet out, if I may be permitted to give a little--?

01:15:18

Cieslik: Go for it!

01:15:21

Gramick: Let me see if I have it on hand. [Ruffling papers] No, I don't but I'll give you. Oh yeah, here it is. Here's our newest one, *A Home for All*, and it is based on the social justice teaching of the church, which is what we all must follow, and, as you see, the *Catholic Call for LGBT Non-Discrimination* [looking at book subtitle on cover]. If we are following the social justice teaching of the church which we are called to do, then we won't discriminate against LGBT people. So that's one, and I'll give you my little spiel too. We have a book for parents called *Blessed Parents*. It's stories from parents who have LGBT children, and then I mentioned lesbian nuns, and we have even a bigger book called *Love Tenderly: Sacred Stories of Lesbian and Queer Religious*. And this is a beautiful book I think of about a couple of dozen stories from lesbian sisters, some of whom are still afraid to use their name. They used pseudonyms, but they're telling their story. They're coming out. So, there's some of our--

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Cieslik: Wonderful! I'm so glad you shared them. It's wonderful to see the output this work grants to the Catholic community.

01:16:56

Gramick: And there's another book. I don't have a copy here, darn it, but it's a book about Michael Judge, written by our executive director Frank DeBernardo. Michael Judge was a Franciscan priest, and you may know the name, or you may not, but he was a Franciscan priest in New York who was the chaplain for the fire department and did outreach to all kinds of marginalized people: people with AIDS, people who have alcoholic problems, people who had no homes, I mean, anyone who was dispossessed. And he's the first when--when the tragedy of 9/11, when it was broadcast, he went into the burning building because he was a chaplain, and he went to save people. But he was the first one carried out; he was the first victim of 9/11.

01:18:05

Cieslik: Oh, my goodness!

01:18:06

Gramick: And he's called the saint of 9/11, and he was a gay priest, and so we are hoping that he will be canonized as our first known gay saint. Of course, we have gay saints, but it's not recognized that they're gay, but he was a gay priest, so.

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Cieslik: That would be wonderful. I'm so glad you included that in the interview.

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Gramick: So, there you go.

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Cieslik: Wonderful. Along those lines, was there anything else you'd like to include before wrapping up the interview?

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Gramick: No, my mind is so dizzy. I can't think of anything else.

01:18:47

Cieslik: No worries, I wanted to thank you so much for participating in this interview for Queer and Catholic: A CLGS Oral History Project. I'm going to conclude the interview now. I really appreciate your time and help in support of this project and all of your work in support of the LGBTQ+ community.

01:19:05

Gramick: And I want to support you and the Pacific School of religion. What you're doing out there is wonderful.

01:19:12

Cieslik: Thank you so much, here I am going to--.

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Gramick: In fact, we've had some of our sisters here do--I don't know what it's called--but a little Zoom session, I guess, with your group.

01:19:29

Cieslik: That's wonderful. I'm so glad to. I know they're working right now to develop a Catholic roundtable--

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Gramick: Good.

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Cieslik: As part of their center for studying gender and sexuality sexualities.

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Gramick: Wonderful!

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Cieslik: Well, thank you.

01:19:44

Gramick: Well, blessing on all that you're doing.

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Cieslik: Thank you so much. It was so wonderful meeting you.

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Gramick: You're welcome. Nice to meet you too.

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Cieslik: Thank you so much, I really appreciate it.

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Gramick: You're welcome.