

## **TAKING A CHANCE ON GOD**

### **Transcription for Subtitles**

#### **Mike Wallace (The Homosexuals):**

00:04

Most Americans are repelled by the mere notion of homosexuality. The CBS News survey shows that two out of three Americans look upon homosexuals with disgust, discomfort or fear.

#### **Anita Bryant:**

00:16

If homosexuals are allowed their civil rights, then so will prostitutes or thieves or anyone else.

#### **Jimmy Swaggart:**

00:21

I've never seen a man in my life that I wanted to marry.

And I'm gonna be blunt and plain.

If one ever looks at me like that I'm gonna kill him and tell God he died.

In case anybody doesn't know, God calls it an abomination.

It's an abom-NATION! It's an abom-NATION!

#### **Titles:**

**00:55**

**Silence To Speech Productions Presents**

**A Film by Brendan Fay**

**Taking a Chance on God**

#### **Phil Donahue**

01:19

You are now about to be bounced from the Jesuits. They're the smartest, you study the longest, you're the most powerful and now you're being bounced.

#### **Larry King**

01:30

How early on in life did you discover your own homosexuality?

#### **Bishop Gene Robinson:**

01:36

There is nothing so powerful as one person living a life of integrity.

That's exactly what John McNeill has done.

That's what Harvey Milk did. I mean, name all of the great heroes of our movement and that is what is changing the world.

**Andy Humm:**

1:54

And it's not just among the Catholic church. I mean, in terms of speaking out about Christianity and religion, really, being something that can embrace gay people instead of reject gay people, which is the image, he's the pioneer.

**Mary Hunt :**

02:07

Even when I think about the work that the rest of us have done, we wouldn't have done it if John had not done the work that he did.

It would never have occurred to us.

And to see the price John's paid, I mean...It's unspeakable.

**John McNeill:**

02:27

My father was a very gentle, loving, compassionate man and he got a job building the Erie Barge Canal...and that's why my family, all of us were born and brought up in Buffalo, New York....

As soon as I was born my mother became ill with some sort of liver problem. And the last memory I have was when I was four years old.

She had an emergency and the ambulance came and they were carrying her down the stairs and I heard her cry out, what's going to happen to my babies?

My mother's sister - she decided that it was her duty to raise her sister's five children, ... So she married my father and they took a vow of chastity.

They lived as brother and sister.

And that was both a blessing and a curse because she was a very angry woman, having no sex life.

**John McNeill**

03:39

Well, my sister Sheila was two years older than I, and so when my mother died, she took over and she really mothered me all through childhood. You know ...I was a sort of sissy kid. She put all of our geography books in her book bag and walked in front of me to, you know, to school in the morning. If anyone came near me, whop, you know, and she let them have the geography books. She was a tough cookie, ...

She died a few years ago of cancer- but she's still with me. So I pray to her constantly you know ... I say 'Sis, help me out with this' or 'direct my journey.'

**John McNeill:**

04:23

I enlisted when I was 17 years old...My best friends in the army ...are still my friends today... 60 years later. Samuel Menashe who has been recognized as perhaps one of the greatest poets in the United States.

**Samuel Menashe:**

04:44

We were not yet 18, and there was a program to get young men into the army as soon as possible.

04:52

We enlisted thinking we would complete our education and go to officer's training school... But we were quickly shunted into the infantry.

05:00

There were 20,000 of us on the Queen Elizabeth. Normally -- in peacetime before the war, it would have 3,000 passengers and crew. We were 20,000 crammed below the decks. We were sleeping sometimes in hammocks, four or five, one on top of the other in the hold.

**John McNeill:**

05:22

Do you remember we sang or attempted to sing Carmen?

**Samuel Menashe:**

05:26

I don't remember that.

**John McNeill:**

05:28

I remember...

**Samuel Menashe:**

05:29

Yeah, you have a good voice, moreover.

**John McNeill:**

05:32

I was singing amour, amour. Entertaining the troops.

**Samuel Menashe:**

05:37

This John you see now was a slender youth.

05:43

We got to France – it was after D-day.

**John McNeill:**

05:47

We were being marched up to the front line. And we knew we would attack the German army the next day. And we were marching in pitch dark with our arms on each other's shoulder, and as we were marching along I heard Sam's voice. He was in another column...

**Samuel Menashe:**

06:08

Parallel.

**John McNeill:**

06:09

Parallel.

So I shouted back to him and we had a conversation which gradually faded as we drew apart ...

**Samuel Menashe:**

06:24

We were mowed down. They were using artillery shells like pistol bullets.

06:30

The official number of people in an infantry company, 4 platoons, was about 190 men..

Well.. at the end of the first day, our company was 29 men ...

**John McNeill:**

06:43

Our outfit was surrounded by German tanks and we were taken prisoner...

and Sam he escaped. He was not taken prisoner.

They loaded all the prisoners into freight cars and sealed the doors.

And we were there for about a week without food or drink.

I remember licking the frost off the nail-heads to get some moisture back into my body. ...

A lot of people died in the freight car.

We finally ended up at a Prisoner of War camp toward the Polish border.

We were sent out to work on farms. And ....the guards deliberately starved us.

I was down to 80 pounds, just skeletal.

And a Polish slave laborer was mixing mash for the animals and it had potatoes and carrots and I couldn't help but, you know, look at the food.

And he saw me looking. So when the guard's back was turned he got a potato out of the mash and threw it to me.

**John McNeill:**

08:04

And so I gestured a thanks to him and he did this, he made the sign of the cross. And that was to me such a beautiful insight that his faith allowed him- gave him the courage to risk his life to feed a complete stranger.

And I always thought I wanted that kind of faith and that kind of courage, you know, to be ready to risk my life to help somebody in need.

08:42

I made the decision to enter the Jesuit Order...

And so I was ordained in 1959, at Fordham University.

I have pictures of the whole family there and you standing behind me.

**Samuel Menashe:**

09:00

I was very happy going to his ordination.

I felt that he was following a certain path which was not only his own but which had been laid out for him before he knew that it was laid out for him..

**John McNeill**

09:17

All along I was intensely aware that I was a gay man and, I had to, somehow or other, deal with that.

I went to Europe to do my doctorate in philosophy, at Leuven University.

And while I was there, I was rather isolated and lonely.

In fact, almost suicidal.

Well...I did meet, ....Tony Jonesco. Who himself had been a victim of the war....he was in high school and his family were a well-to-do family in the south of France, and the Nazis broke in, and because his mother had married .... a Jewish man ..., the Nazis killed his mother, his father and all the other members of the family. ...

And when I met him, he had taken all the furniture out of their chateau and was selling it piece by piece and living in a peasant hovel.

10:21

Being a good Irish Catholic I thought that my route to God was via living out a chaste life,... but God had another plan in store.

And so I was led into a relationship of love.

**John McNeill:**

10:41

With him I experienced genuine homosexual love, a real love of person to person. And we were four, five years together meeting each other on occasion. Sometimes I would go to the south of France. Sometimes he would come up to Paris.

11:00

And the experience of the joy and peace that comes with that.

And it was a clear indication to me that homosexual love was in itself a good love, and could be a holy love.

**John McNeill**

11:27

Then I came back to the United States to teach at LeMoyne College in Syracuse.

**Jim Bernauer**

11:33

Well, LeMoyne was a very lively campus in terms of war and peace issues.

I remember Dorothy Day came through and spoke there. It was a legacy of Dan Berrigan from earlier in the '60s.

**John McNeill:**

11:47

I took over a lot of his work including his work for peace. We took the stand that as Christians we had to be conscientious objectors.

**(Photo:**

11:51

Stop this lousy war!  
Vets for Peace.)

**John McNeill:**

12:00

So I began to go out in public and lead in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the Syracuse area.

**(Article:**

12:03

“Father McNeill actively counsels potential conscientious objectors...”)

**Jim Bernauer**

12:08

John had credibility as a veteran in speaking out against the war.

Especially as a Catholic priest who had been a veteran. Very rare.

So John got me involved along with students in doing various anti-war activities

**John McNeill:**

12:29

We gave this talk in Utica, New York.

**Jim Bernauer**

12:32

And John gave a very passionate address. There was a large audience. But there were a larger number of people protesting and sort of speaking up for the soldiers and shouting.

**John McNeill:**

12:43

And the state police came and escorted us out of town because we were disturbing the peace.

**Jim Bernauer:**

12:50

And they told us, "Don't come back to Utica" which I have not returned to since then!

**Jim Clune:**

12:58

My door was 3 doors down from where he was living as a resident advisor and I immediately began conversations with him, got to know him.

**Jim Clune:**

13:09

He was influential in a lot of my thinking.... as was Dan Berrigan through the whole drama of what was going on in the late '60s.

**Ann Clune:**

13:18

He was just such a total presence. He wasn't just a teacher in a classroom..... He talked with people as if we were thinking adults. He didn't treat us as children who needed to be told what to think.

**Kate Clinton:**

13:34

I loved how as a teacher he really listened to people well and then made them look better with their questions.

And really gave a lot of thought. I mean there were pauses. As a comedienne I learned a lot about pauses from watching him!

**Jim Clune:**

13:52

I asked John McNeill to officiate at our wedding, you know, and he was very clear and said, you're the ones that are conferring the sacrament upon each other. I'm just the official witness.

**John McNeill:**

14:02

It was a part of the move away from total dependence of paternal authority.

And since students had to make the decision of being conscientious objectors, many of them had to flee the country when the army denied them that position.

**John McNeill:**

14:21

I went up to Toronto. I went up to help my students and I went into a gay bar- the St Charles Bar and met "St." Charles who is sitting right beside me... That was 43 years ago.

**Charles Chiarelli:**

14:40

We chatted about a lot of things. It was really unusual for someone to meet somebody at a gay bar and talk theology and Maurice Blondel and all sorts of politics and everything. It was very interesting and we sort of bonded together almost immediately.

**(Letters**

15:04

I miss you terribly.

15:15

I love you with all my heart Charlie. Jack)

**John & Charlie ( SING)**

15:22

I wanna be loved by you, just you,  
And nobody else would do,  
I wanna be loved by you,  
Ooh ooh ooh, boop-boop-be-doo!

**Rose Dececchi:**

15:36

My mother was great. She said, he's my son, I love him. I would prefer that he wasn't gay because I know it's going to be difficult for him, especially at that time in New York, there was a lot of gay bashing and she was worried about him.

But she said, I love him and it doesn't make any difference. And she said, they take care of each other. They love each other so that was wonderful. I thought she was great. You know, for a lady coming with no education from a country that was so Catholic...and she just accepted it.

**Charlie Chiarelli:**

16:13

...the fact that he wanted to make God his principal love object.

And then when he started preaching that, so, the first time I heard it I said, okay, fine.

Get him to do the laundry then.

**Linda Jairam:**

16:25

Uncle Charlie is, I want to say, as spiritual as Father Jack but you never see that side of him because he'll be busy in the kitchen cooking, or he'll be busy doing something, busy taking care of the house. But when you sit down and talk to him, he is as spiritual in terms of what he believes.



**John McNeill:**

16:42

The first time Charlie and I had a chance to move in together, he came from Canada and joined me in Syracuse, and the first morning we had breakfast together, he came around behind me with a jar of wheat germ and poured it all over me.

It was running down my collar and everything. And I said, oh my God, this guy is a kook...

So I said to him, Charlie, why did you do that? And he said, oh, I had to.

And I said, what do you mean you had to? And he said, well, it says right here on the jar, pour this over your favorite fruit.

**Dr Charles Socarides (VO):**

17:27

Homosexuality is in fact a mental illness which has reached epidemiological proportions...

**(VO):**

17:34

Dr Charles Socarides is a New York psychoanalyst, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine. Here lecturing to a group of resident psychiatrists on homosexuality ...

17:45

For the police view homosexuality we talk to Inspector James Fisk of the Los Angeles Police Dept.

**Inspector James Fisk:**

17:51

During the year 1964 we arrested around 3,000 homosexuals.  
I can state conclusively that the problem is growing.

**Detective:**

18:05

They can be anywhere. They can be judges, lawyers.  
We ought to know. We've arrested all of them.

There may be some here today who will be homosexual in the future.

There are a lot of kids here. There may be some girls that will turn lesbian. We don't know.

But it's serious. Don't kid yourselves about it. And you will be caught!

Don't think you won't be caught.

Because this is one thing you cannot get away with!

**(Article:**

“Homosexuality and the Christian”)

**John McNeill:**

18:32

There was a long article by a Jesuit friend of mine, named Milhaven, on homosexuality, claiming that it was definitely evil. And basing the argument on the attitude of certain psychiatrists who saw it as mental illness.

**Ginny Apuzzo:**

18:52

The whole medical model, gays are sick, came from people like Socarides who would get enormous television time going out there rebuffing any gesture that was made toward our equality ...

**John McNeill:**

19:05

Well, I knew this was totally wrong. My own experience of a gay loving relationship was that it was healthy, and good, and holy and life affirming.

And so I said to myself, well, this is what God wants of me, to sit down and study deeply this whole question from every viewpoint. Read all the psychiatric information. Read all the scriptural information. Read all the tradition.

So I produced three major articles for the Homiletic and Pastoral Review, which was a very conservative Catholic magazine for priests.

And the editor wrote back and said, “It’s a good thing your article is just arrived right now, because I’ve decided to resign as editor and I know if I publish these I’ll be fired.”

So he published the three articles. And they got a very strong response.

**Nancy Wilson:**

20:05

And of course, for us, this was absolutely wonderful to have someone who is a Roman Catholic priest, who would go on record saying the kinds of really revolutionary things John was saying about human sexuality, about homosexuality and the church.

**Dan McCarthy:**

20:21

John McNeill used all of his Jesuit smarts to go to the Jesuit libraries and John put it all together in a way that could stand up to the toughest intellectual scrutiny. You know, here is a distinguished credentialed Jesuit theologian who has staked all of his career on this scholarly work. So it gave an intellectual credential, a believability, John did, to what we longed for, to feel that maybe we're okay.

**Mary Hunt:**

20:57

They had to really take John McNeill seriously. He knew scripture, he knew systematic or dogmatic theology, he knew moral theology and ethics, and all of those fields then had to respond.

**John McNeill:**

21:08

We know that in scripture there is no condemnation of a loving, gay relationship. We know from psychology that many people grow up either gay or lesbian and they don't choose it and they can't change it. So they are that way by God's will and not because of some sin or sickness.

And so I argued very strongly, the church should seriously reconsider and realize that homosexual relationships can be a legitimate human form of love.

**Andy Humm:**

21:40

Because these were all new ideas. For Catholics to be talking about : the idea that gay could be good, and that you could practice homosexuality in consonance with Christ's teachings- these were all new ideas.

**John McNeill:**

21:56

When those articles appeared in the Homiletic and Pastoral, I received a letter from somebody connected with a new organization just beginning in Los Angeles called Dignity .....

Telling me that they had just founded a group for gay Catholics. They had seen my articles and they wanted permission to reproduce them and distribute them as a sort of foundation article.

And so the Dignity statement of purpose was originally developed out of those articles.

**Robert Carter:**

22:28

In the Spring of 1972, John gave a presentation on gay liberation, and it was the first time that any of us had ever heard anything about gay liberation.

And for me this opened up a whole world I knew nothing about

**John McNeill:**

22:48

Then a few months later, I got another letter saying, "We've had several inquiries about starting a Dignity chapter in the New York City area. Would you be interested in helping us do that?" So I said, yes I would.

**Robert Carter:**

23: 04

I went to John and I told him that I was gay and that I would like to help him establish a chapter of Dignity.

The first Dignity public Mass was in late October 1972.

**John McNeill:**

23:17

Over 100 people showed up and were extremely enthusiastic about it and, you know, very anxious to start in, you know, building a support community.

**Ken Gomolka:**

23:29

People carried the guilt of being gay and Catholic. And when John spoke, they just tossed it away. Tossed the guilt away.

Because he really laid on them how much God loves them and who they are was important to God and that Jesus was there for them.

And that's the message gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender people wanted to hear.

**John McNeill:**

24:03

Our primary purpose was to bring the message that God does love gay & lesbian people and give them confidence in that love.

**Ginny Appuzzo:**

24:12

To be God's children, all Gods children in a Catholic Church to me was an extraordinary experience. It was like coming home.

**John McNeill:**

24:26

And I always remember using the line: Dignity is not something we can give ourselves. But with the help of God Dignity is something that we can give each other.

**Kate Clinton:**

24:39

Dignity. Dignity. What a name for a group. No matter what you do, no matter what you tell us we have Dignity.

**Robert Carter:**

24:47

Then in June of '73 the Gay Pride parade came...

**Ken Gomolka:**

24:52

And we had a meeting to discuss whether or not we would march in the parade. And it was a rowdy meeting, everybody giving opinions about should we do this? Are we offending people? All of this... So I called for a vote. And only one person said no....

**Dan McCarthy:**

25:17

So there we were on Fifth Avenue in New York City, announcing to the world, hey, here we are, look at the banner, look at us, put it together, folks. Everything about us is OK.

**Robert Carter:**

25:27

We got a good crowd for the parade, and I remember one young lady saying to another, they'll never believe this back in Wichita!

**Ken Gomolka:**

25:37

Every once in a while you would get somebody shouting out: 'you're sinful; you're the devil workers.'

**Robert Carter:**

25: 44

And we always stopped in front of St Patrick's Cathedral and had a little worship service as a Dignity group. I mean it was just a couple of minutes because we couldn't hold up the whole parade.

**John McNeill:**

25:55

I remember an elderly woman called me over and I walked over and she spit right in my face- I thought, 'Wow, is this Christ-like?'

**Ken Gomolka:**

26:07

And you got the jeers. There was a whole little group of people and they had their signs but if you watched the people on either side they- they fought with them.

**Dan McCarthy:**

26:24

As you passed 14th Street, you knew, now you were in home territory. You are entering into the Village. And the crowds would be so much thicker. And they would be really going berserk. And that was just intoxicating.

**Ken Gomolka:**

26:34

And it was one of the most joyous, happiest, liberating feelings I think that anybody ever went through especially your first gay pride march.

**John McNeill:**

26:48

I had, in the meantime, joined the faculty of Woodstock Seminary, in New York City.

And the faculty urged me to major those articles into a book.

So I sat down and spent another year putting those articles in a book form.

So they told me to send it to seven Jesuit moral theologians and all seven of them praised it to the skies.

Said it was a real contribution, you know, serious, theological work.

So it went off to Rome and the secretary to the General hid it in a drawer.

And six months went by and I heard nothing.

So, finally, I wrote to a good friend of mine in Rome and he searched for it and found it hidden in this drawer and took it out and gave it to Father Arrupe, Pedro Arrupe was the General.

So he gave me an imprimi potest, which is the official Latin for, you know, permission to publish the book, ...

**Robert Carter:**

27:52

And it was approved and it was published with the imprimi potest, and then all hell broke loose.

**Tom Brokaw ( VO):**

28:02

Father John McNeill is a Jesuit teacher, a scholar and a writer and for the past two years he has been dealing with the Roman Catholic Church on the subject of homosexuality.

He has now received permission to publish his book *The Church and the Homosexual* in which he argues that homosexual love is as legitimate from the church's point of view as heterosexual love.

**John McNeill:**

28:22

It was Tom Brokaw's first day on the show and here he had to handle this hot potato of a book on homosexuality.

**Tom Brokaw:**

28:29

Father McNeill welcome. First of all, do you have any way of knowing how many homosexuals are involved in the Catholic church. How many Roman Catholics in this country alone? A rough estimate.

**John McNeill:**

28:38

And they informed me that they were going to ask if I myself was a gay man. And the only person I notified about that was my sister Sheila.

I said, Sis, ye know I am going to be on the Today show tomorrow and I am going to publicly admit that I am a gay man. And Sis said, "Oh, I have known that for years."

**Tom Brokaw:**

28:58

You are obviously caught up with the subject. How do you classify yourself?

**John McNeill:**

29:02

Well, I identify psychically with the homosexual community. I see myself as a homosexual.

**Bernard Lynch:**

29:09

'I am psychically gay.' And I am kind of sitting there and saying, Wow, what is psychically gay? But it was enough, you know?

**Charlie Chiarelli:**

29:22

It was a very exciting moment. The fact that there he came out to about 20 million people.

**Tom Brokaw:**

29:26

Father McNeill, thank you very much. The author of the book called The Church and the Homosexual. One of the controversies in the Roman Catholic church today.

**Andy Humm:**

29:34

It landed like... I don't know if he even expected this- but it landed like a **bomb** in the country, in the world really.

**Russell Barber (VO):**

29:43

Here is one in Spanish, and we have another one here that is in Italian.

**John McNeill:**

29:48

And it became a best seller immediately and I became the darling of all of the talk shows. I was three times on the Donahue show, three times on the Larry King Show.

**Larry King (VO):**

30:05

He is Father John McNeill. Father McNeill wrote the book 'The Church and The Homosexual'

**John McNeill:**

30:07

And many others. For a year I traveled all around the country- every major city I think, giving talk shows and retreats.

**Robert Carter:**

30:17

The book was really, I think, the single most important event of the 20th century for gay liberation. Because it was not only was not only Catholics but non-Catholics also who took over the book.

I mean the book just became general reading for any Christian who was interested in homosexuality.

**Nancy Wilson:**

30:41

There isn't anyone in ministry to LGBT people who hasn't read John McNeill's books

**GinnyApuzzo:**

30:48

You have no idea what it's like to be growing up in the '40s and '50s and come into the '60s, and feel like every institution in society is out to get you. Medical people say you're sick. The law says you're a criminal. And the church says you're a sinner. Where do you go when you come up out of that kind of experience?

To have a man write a book about homosexuals and their place in the church, and their basic human dignity may have rippled in the intellectual world, but to me it was an alleluia. It was an alleluia. It was there's hope.

**Mary Hunt:**

31:37

The impact of the book was not only to push theological issues but it pushed personal buttons. The difference was John was talking. John was an honest gay man. And a lot of the men who lead the Church then and who continue to lead the Church are simply not honest gay men.

**Nancy Wilson:**

31:56

I've never read his hate mail but I know that there was a lot of it. People have threatened his life for just daring to speak out.

**Hate Mail:****What harm you are doing the Church of Christ...****...your lying words.****...such a freak as you speak publicly...****Andy Humm:**

32:07

I don't know if he expected to get the Today Show and the Donahue Show and all of these other programs that brought it this international attention but it's the kind of thing where the press looks at that and says, Catholic, Homosexual, you know it's right in the title- 'The Church and The Homosexual' and just went with that ...and that created a media explosion and a cultural explosion to have this dialogue and that's why the church ended up putting a lid on it.

**William Smith:**

32:34

It does not represent, in fact, it contradicts what the Catholic church teaches.

If I know the church teaches something else and I teach the opposite, I think I have a problem and I'm causing other people problems.

And this would be part of the problem with Father McNeill. He could not be unaware of what the church teaches.

**James Lloyd:**

32:58

He is articulating something which is counter Catholic.

And it is very upsetting to people who say here's a Catholic priest from a prestigious order is articulating that which the church itself teaches is wrong. What is this?

**William Smith:**

33:14

And he really thinks the church should teach something else. That's his point of view- but we can call that "McNeillism"- you don't call it Catholicism.



**James Lloyd:**

33:23

Cause if, as I think, sexuality is given by the Creator, really heavily, towards procreation, and these kinds of relationships... Because the parts don't fit! Can't meet that need and become selfish- even though I understand it. It's selfish.

**William Smith:**

33:46

But the main thrust of the teaching is that such activity is contrary to correct Christian practice.

**James Lloyd:**

33:56

Hey John, keep your big mouth shut. You are just saying stuff which is very confusing, that is very much against the teaching of the church.

So we are going to ask you, henceforth, be quiet.

**John McNeill:**

34:08

It was at the end of that year that Rome issued an order forbidding me to speak publicly on the issue of homosexuality,

**Andy Humm:**

34:21

So John gets silenced over this. Gets told, "You can't talk about this anymore!"

**John McNeill:**

34:28

And I prayed about that and thought, well, they need time to assimilate what's going on, the new information, the new data, and so I should obey the order. So I agreed to silence.

**Mary Hunt:**

34:44

Why he would accept the silencing was very much, I think, on people's minds. Certainly on my mind. I mean, I can't imagine that I would have given the institutional church that much deference.

But John, remember, is a Jesuit, and that fourth vow of the Jesuits to the Pope and certain allegiance to the hierarchical church is very, very real and deep in John...

**Bernard Lynch:**

35:05

There's a certain naiveté that accompanies priesthood. When you give yourself so young to something for the right reasons,

And I think that he believed, because he believed in his Catholicism, that the truth would out.

**Robert Raines:**

35:58

I learned about John McNeill's book, "The Church and the Homosexual." I got it and read it. And at that time, coming in the wake of the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam movement, the women's movement, in our lexicon these were all justice issues and rights for gay people and lesbian people, also a justice issue.

So I thought, alright, well, let's see if John McNeill would be willing to come to Kirkridge so I contacted him and in 1977, we had our first gay, lesbian and Christian event.

**John McNeill:**

36:33

In January I began a special retreat for gay men called 'Intimacy With God'. And those retreats were wonderfully received. Over-booked every year. We had people living out in motels around the area.

**Bp. Gene Robinson:**

36:47

And then I heard of this retreat at Kirkridge for gay men. But more importantly it was a religious retreat.

This was a very difficult time in my life when my wife and I were talking about what we would do about this emerging sense that, you know, gay wasn't just part of who I was but who I was.

So meeting John, someone who had put together his sexuality and his spirituality, in and of itself was light at the end of the tunnel.

But to find someone with his spirit, with his joy—that was a different kind of light at the end of the tunnel—it was a call to the future.

**Mary Hunt:**

37:33

Some people found that weekend at Kirkridge the highlight of their year. There were people who were closeted where they were back home, maybe in a marriage or working in a congregation as a Protestant minister, who would go to those weekends at Kirkridge and finally be themselves.

**Bp. Gene Robinson:**

37:48

It was probably just a few months after that that I ultimately decided with my wife—it was a decision we made together—that in order to live up to our vows, to honor one another in the name of God, which we had made at the altar, in order to keep those vows we needed to let each other go.

And so the retreat with John and the other men there, I mean, there's no reason in the world he would have ever remembered me, there was nothing dramatic about my story, there were stories like mine in the room all the way around, and yet, of course being on the receiving end of John and his ministry- it just made all the difference in the world.

**John McNeill:**

38:36

I continued giving retreats and workshops, preaching to Dignity but nothing in the public media, you know, and no publications.

And so every day I was tormented, am I being silent out of obedience to an order, cause, as a Jesuit, I took a fourth vow of direct obedience to the Pope, and this order to silence came from the Pope, You know, so I felt obliged in conscience, therefore, to obey it.

In the meantime, AIDS appeared on the scene and became a major issue.

**Andy Humm:**

39:16

It was a horrible time. People were dropping like flies. There were no medicines that were maintaining people the way they are today.

**Ginny Apuzzo:**

39:24

We were visiting our sick, we were burying our dead, we were serving each other in love and compassion.

**Ken Gomolka:**

39:33

In '86 Cardinal Ratzinger came out with this horrible what they ended up calling the Halloween letter.

**Bernard Lynch:**

39:42

...telling us that we were disordered in our nature, evil in our love, and that those of us, who were doing the work of the gospel on the streets, very vulnerable, we were told....

**Andy Humm:**

39:57

...essentially if people work for gay rights and the society reacts violently because you're asking for something to which no one has any conceivable right -- this is the phrase -- you shouldn't be surprised when people want to beat you up!

**John McNeill:**

40:11

So justifying gay mugging- in that letter. Right out of Rome. I couldn't believe it.

**Bernard Lynch:**

40:17

When people needed God most- this is what they got.

**John McNeill:**

40:22

And then they said that all gay orientation is an intrinsic disorder and any action flowing from it would be evil and therefore we condemn homosexual orientation as an intrinsic disorder.

**Ken Gomolka:**

40:39

After that they started throwing all Dignity chapters out of the churches.

**Television news clip:**

40:44

Homosexual Catholics in New York protesting the eviction of their organization Dignity from St. Francis Xavier Church by the New York Archdiocese.

**Bernard Lynch:**

41:00

And we were expelled from St Francis Xavier in Greenwich Village

**Robert Carter:**

41:06

Everyone lit a candle and we marched with lighted candles -- and I must say there were probably over a thousand of us.

**Bernard Lynch**

41:17

The procession from St. Francis Xavier, it was not a parade. It was the total antithesis of the gay pride parades that we used to participate in.

I could not believe it was happening. ....

If you want to ask me now whatever many years later, Bernard Lynch, when did the freedom die? It was that night.

**John McNeill**

41:50

So I wrote a letter to my Provincial to the effect that having prayed over this, I could not in conscience obey the order giving up my ministry to gay people. On the contrary, because of AIDS I had a greater need than ever to speak up.

**Television shows:**

42:12

Our guest today is Father John McNeill a psychotherapist and one of the founders of Dignity.

**Larry King show:**

42:17

That priest is with us at our studios in Miami- he is Father John McNeill.

**Phil Donahue:**

42:21

You are Father John McNeill and I am pleased to say this is your second visit to our program It's a long time between visits Father.

**VO:**

42:27

Thanks very much for coming father...

**John McNeill:**

42:28

I got a letter from Rome telling me they were about to expel me... The Cardinal wrote me a letter saying it's interesting, he said, we got thousands of letters saying what good work you're doing and how so many people came back to the church because of you.

But none of them dispute our basic issue; that is, that you disagree with church teaching on homosexuality. Which is true, none of them did dispute that.

So, then a few weeks later the Provincial telephoned me and came to my office with two witnesses and read me a letter in Latin telling me that I was expelled completely from the Society of Jesus. I must pack my things and leave any Jesuit residence immediately and never come back. And I was no longer to be considered a member of the Jesuit Order.

That was a very painful moment.

**Charlie Chiarelli:**

43:35

He phoned me afterwards, He was really upset. He was crying on the phone...

**Dan McCarthy:**

43:40

He cried. I watched tears coming down his face.

It's hard when you see someone that has that much stature, you know, this worldwide reputation.

**Robert Carter:**

43:52

John's Jesuit identity was very important to him. I know that because when I had to make a similar decision, I mean I opted for my Jesuit identity but I know that John's Jesuit identity was also very important.

**Robert Raines:**

44:06

I think Charlie probably had a big role to play in just being John's comrade through all this silencing and through all the trouble with the Vatican and with the Jesuits. And so I think the partnership was a stabilizing and comforting reality for John.

**Charlie Chiarelli:**

44:27

One of the most painful... it wasn't an episode...but just a painful period, was that we had to live so many different closets. There were friends that wouldn't have approved of a priest having a lover and there were those that know us as friends but not lovers because they couldn't accept the fact that two men could be living together.

So we had so many closets it took so much energy to keep track of and have to live through. There were painful periods of trying to keep track of everything and not being fully ourselves so when he was finally expelled from the Jesuits it was really painful but liberating at the same time because now he could be free to speak to any group that really needed to hear him and wanted to hear him.

**John McNeill:**

45:19

Walter Wink said, when I was thrown out, he's a famous Protestant theologian.

He said, "John, when the Vatican slammed the door on you, the wind it created will blow open a thousand other doors."

**Robert Raines:**

45:35

So he went all over the country and had retreats and lectures and his ministry expanded.

**John Stasio:**

45:43

So it is with enormous privilege and gratitude that I would like to honor John as the first recipient of the Spiritual Pioneer Award.

**Song**

"Alive, alive oh,oh  
Alive, alive oh, oh"

**Ken Page:**

46:02

I come to John as a spiritual seeker, because his message is a message of joy; it's a message of humanity. It's a simple message of God, and love and invitation.

**Peter Bolger:**

46:15

He helped affirm that love between men was a beautiful thing and that love between men was fine.

**Robert Raines:**

46:20

So, ironically, the Vatican wanting to shut him up, really opened up his mouth to a much larger audience.

**Kate Clinton:**

46:30

Thank you. I'm originally from upstate New York.

Syracuse New York. Thank you.

And between 1965 and 1969 I went to an outstanding Jesuit College named LeMoyne College. Yes.

At that time I was trying to sort out a lot of things out.

I was really trying to come out.

And one of my beloved ethics professors who is here today and is a great honor for me to introduce is Father John McNeill the founder of Dignity here in New York.

**Text:**

46:54

Just five months after John McNeill was expelled from the Jesuits, he was named Grand Marshal of the 1987 New York City Pride Parade.

**John McNeill**

47:18

It's an honor and a privilege to stand in solidarity with you, all of you, as your Grand Marshal in today's parade.

**Kate Clinton:**

47:32

Well there was a certain sense of seeing him there, for me, of sort of full circle.

Of no matter what we were told, no matter how much we were told to be quiet- here we are.

**John McNeill**

47:46

We must fight not to be ruled by fear.

We must realize that violence long before it touches our body first destroys the spirit of its victim with fear.

From my own experience as a prisoner of war in Germany in WWII, I came to the conclusion that fear is the primary weapon evil humans use to paralyze the good and to destroy their liberation.

We must not allow the enemies of our liberation to continue any longer to promote fear in our ranks by isolating us and driving us back into the closet.

Our primary weapon against fear is to stay united in strong, loving, supporting communities.

We must listen to the spirit of courage within us, listen to the voices of the oppressed around us and then we must act for human rights and for equality for everyone.

We are the gay people of the United States of America and we stand together courageously, proud, strong and united! Thank you!

**Judge Harvey Brownstone:**

49:43

We are grateful for this momentous occasion.

John and Charlie as you have both said many times you are blessed to have found each other and to have made such a wonderful life together and everyone here rejoices with you.

Now therefore, I, Harvey Brownstone Judge of the Ontario Court of Justice by virtue of the power vested in me under the Marriage Act of Ontario do hereby pronounce you John McNeill and Charles Chiarelli to be finally- legally married spouses and partners for life. Congratulations!

**Mary Hunt:**

50:41

John needs Charlie as much as Charlie needs John, or more in the best sense of the word... in the best sense of a good couple. One could say that their partnership has enhanced each of them. And that really is, in my view, how love works.

**Robert Carter**

50:55

John is certainly the most important Catholic priest in the gay movement, you know, for gay liberation.

And not only for gay liberation but for gay's understanding of themselves theologically.

**Mary Hunt:**

51:10

This is the stuff of doctoral dissertations. This is... John McNeill made church history. John McNeill made church history.

He didn't read about church history, he didn't teach church history, John McNeill made church history.

**Bp. Gene Robinson:**

51:22

John McNeill, along with a few others, were those early prophets who saw the truth.

Who literally saw the handwriting on the wall as the prophets saw in the Old Testament, saw the truth, and then had the courage to tell that truth and paid dearly for it.

**John McNeill**

51:42

When I was dismissed from the Jesuits,...

And it suddenly dawned on me, I had no place to be buried...and I prayed over that.

It really saddened me.



**John McNeill:**

I love the Jesuit graveyard at the Martyr's Shrine up in Amsterdam, New York, and had fully expected to be buried there ...

But I then came to the decision that I would ask permission at Kirkridge.

They have a memorial garden where they distribute the ashes of people who died with AIDS.

And I would be cremated and have my ashes distributed in the memorial garden.

And then to have a plaque put up which would read, "Here lies a gay priest, John McNeill, and his lover, Charles Chiarelli. Together they took a chance on God." ....

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Credits :

52:52

In April 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI.

53:16

Dignity/New York still meets weekly in a Protestant Church in Greenwich Village.

53:26

In June 2011, John returned to a hero's welcome as part of the EuroPride Festival.

**John McNeill:**

53:41

You know all the time during those 25 years I said what a crime that all I can reach are these hundred people and this audience and I kept praying that some day I would be able to reach out through television to thousands of people and bring them this message of God's love and God's hope. And you're making that come true.

55:35

For more information about DIGNITY visit [www.dignityusa.org](http://www.dignityusa.org)

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