

# Happiness is a Warm Nun

*Mother Inferior, the Most Irreverent Mother Abyss of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence, is otherwise known as Fabian Lo Schiavo. After surviving a difficult period as a gay Catholic monk, he left the Catholic Church and converted to Anglicanism. Now he is a political activist, and a familiar character of Sydney's gay and lesbian community. Here, Fabian told Eugene Hoh about the Sisters, confrontation, and institutionalised religion...*

## *On the Order of Perpetual Indulgence*

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence were an outgrowth of the activities of a group in America called the Radical Faerie Movement, and that was a group of gay men trying to explore alternative spiritualities... Part of it was a real, genuine attempt to mix an alternative sort of spirituality with the clown, the image of the 'holy fool'... mix all that up with activist gay politics... They were able to do all sorts of remarkable things, and challenge all sorts of institutions and ideas because of their habit and because they were brand new and shocking and confronting. In Australia, the Order was inspired by the American Sisters and facilitated by an Australian Sister who'd lived with them for a year, and he and I looked at the idea of setting up a similar group in Sydney. But I was coming from the perspective of fantasising about being a nun, which was a fantasy I didn't understand... and he was coming from the perspective of 'We want a group in Sydney that's exactly like the American group' - Radical Faeries and activist politics, probably... In the early years we were an attempt to be an amalgam of the Radical Faerie Movement, of people's personal fantasies, enjoyment in dressing up, and gay politics in Sydney.

It'll be ten years in November, since we made that first public appearance. And in those ten years we've comprised every shade of religious and political opinion, and we've had many people come through the order and leave. And they've brought all sorts of issues with them, issues of gay spirituality, politics, the fight against the Right Wing, the fight against conformism, fighting on behalf of women's right to control their own bodies, i.e. the abortion issue, then when AIDS came, the sex education issue... We've had student nuns on campus who've had office in the SRC, for instance - in Sydney University... Sister Mary-Annalingus - now that Sister has gone to London and has started an English house of our Order...

## *How many sisters are there in Australia?*

Over 50... Sisters scattered all over the place who keep in touch with us. We have a newsletter, we have a monthly meeting... There are more

women joining the Order now, and we now have to think about how we're going to accommodate that because we are an order of gay male nuns... We also, for the first time in 10 years, have had straight men applying to join, we have now one non-gay man who's a novice in our Order. We're fairly loose in our structure, so people can go after a while if they're not interested - but we are not loose in our ideology... The central idea to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is expunging, or



*The Most Irreverent Mother Abyss*

expiating, stigmatic guilt - that's the guilt with which lesbian and gay people are stigmatised... Our motto is 'No More Guilt', which may seem to say 'no more guilt, do your own thing, anything you want to do'. No. It's no more 'Guilt', it's lots more responsibility for self... The other part of the Order's Ministry is Promulgation of Universal Joy, and that is really a lot more challenging than anything I've met in the Anglican Church, in other words every action we do as Sisters has to be looked at in light of the question, 'Does it prom-

ulgate joy, universal joy?' And it's very difficult, it means everything we do - we have to take responsibility for it... We wear our habits not in a vicious attack on religious women... Many nuns whom we've met from the Roman Catholic Church - and we have good relationships with them - say that priests hated them and treated them like unpaid servants. And I've heard priests say, 'Oh, yeah, nuns, gosh, y'know, nothing worse!'... But we're not going to romanticise the religious life that women lived in traditional religious communities... We're certainly not going to trivialise it and mock it - we don't, we make our own habits according to our own design and we use our role for positive strengthening of good things within the community... If I go up to attend a rally, it's usually in habit, because we are very much now a symbol of the gay community's refusal to go underground and go straight-acting. And every couple of months there's a letter in the Star Observer which attacks us, singles us out as what's wrong with the gay community - 'Those Sisters... they're damaging the process by which gay people can be assimilated into the straight community in a way that reassures straight people that we're just like them and we're not upsetting them, don't want to upset them.'

## *And so there's a problem with confrontational tactics?*

Yes. People don't like confrontational tactics and in the gay community, there may even be in the lesbian community, there's a fighting shy of confrontation. I think the Sisters are a fairly gentle form of confrontation... we're an established, institutionalised form of confrontational politics that refuses to go underground, and there's no intention to wind the Order up by any means, although to be perfectly frank with you I thought, in the early '80s, the Order's days were over because of the issue with AIDS... I'd seen what had happened to our American Sisters in San Francisco... I saw there the effects that AIDS was having on people in '83. People were just in a state of trauma and shock, and I thought 'Well, that's the end of the Sisters - no one will want us around anymore,' because we are on about gentle humour... tongue-in-cheek humour that people just won't be able to sustain because they're dying, or losing their

lovers through AIDS. But in fact, our work has been much more clearly defined since the virus made its appearance, because as soon as we could...we made sure we got involved in issues like safe sex and our Sisters are involved, of course, not in habit but they're known to be Sisters...caring for people living with AIDS as well... We haven't run away from the issue - it's come right into our own community with the death of one of our Sisters, and I think that when that happened, it made it clear to all the Sisters that this wasn't an issue outside...

Now for me, it's a matter of keeping it balanced between my Anglican involvement, and my involvement with the Sisters - now my Anglican involvement was weakened by the fact that we had a priest who decided he'd had enough of me being attached to the parish and all the publicity that used to bring about gays and lesbians in the Church, and attached as it was to my role as Mother Superior, or in my other ecclesiastical-satirical personas, and he'd had enough of this, so he sacked me from all my parish duties, after 14 years in that community... and had told me to leave the parish community. I didn't, I stayed... I became overnight, from one of the busiest parishioners to a parishioner whose only permissible role was to sit on a pew and go home again. And that did me good because it made me realise - my real support was within some people in the parish, not the whole parish community - and within the Sisters... The Sisters were a much more important part of my life, and they were very, very good...

*So you can discount any attacks that you might have from conservative religious people, and you can afford to be dismissive of that kind of criticism?*

Well, I think, pretty generally, we can, because they are all so dismissive of any kind of openness, any kind of activism around the gay and lesbian issue, but we'll listen to it - but I think we deal with that pretty well by throwing it back at them through their own kind of language... The other opposition to the Order comes sometimes in more articulate ways - women sometimes are concerned that it's not a clear enough statement, and it can fall into the trap of being anti-woman. We understand that, and of course we try and deal with that in the way we behave... We don't shy away from it, we will go into dialogue with anyone who's got that concern... But we're not going to just say that because they're critical of the image we've chosen ourselves, that we should drop it and disband the order - no, you know, the very fact that we exist in habit is a stimulus to discuss issues like 'How should gay men behave, how do gay men feel about the oppression of women, what should we do about the Church...?' Because we're a confrontational symbol, we're a stimulus to that discussion. And we find increasingly that non-separatist lesbians are interested in what we're doing, and some of them have come to join.

*- so are there separatists and coalitionists...*

Yes, the growth of coalition politics has brought women in close connection with us, and in fact, some of those women are applying to join. But those women include women who themselves were excluded from lesbian communities

because they had male children, or because they had children, and they had good friendships with men. So they are coming from an experience of being excluded by separatism as well... The Order is such a welding of people who are totally different in terms of their background. Some gay men who've never worked in a mixed community don't have any close relationships with lesbians, and some women are coming from... perhaps a slightly isolated experience as well. And you get men from strictly gay political backgrounds - very, very intense commitment to social justice issues - and gay men coming because they're attracted by the frock. And we don't exercise too much control... people will find out whether the Sisters are useful to them pretty quickly.



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*The habit and other icons of the Sisters - what do they symbolise?*

Well, a whole range of very complex things, sometimes just the humour of cross-gender behaviour... It also states the complete reversal of roles, it means that men are calling each other 'Sister' and dealing with each other in a different way... The severity of the traditional habit shows how depersonalising that habit was, and when we come into contact with people, they can't often deal with that...all they see is our face and hands... Its a symbol, inversely, of the denial of sexuality and humanity - bursting out from all of this sombre clothing. We're a symbol too of the gay male community 'misbehaving' - a lot of people would say 'That's what we mean when we say, "if gay people just behaved, we'd like them better, if they stopped knocking women or knocking nuns"... then we'd understand that they had a legitimate cause, but they obviously...are not

prepared to behave seriously, so we won't take any notice of them.' So we're a symbol of the complexity of the issue of lesbian and gay visibility, but also of its simplicity - we're different, we just look very different. So we are a kind of living statement of diversity and difference. Also, we're very decorative...

*Can you explain the Patron of the Sisters -*

The Holy Dingo? Well, when the Order was founded, there was a case of a Seventh-Day Adventist family who were tangled up with the disappearance of a baby, and we felt at the time that the dingo was unfairly blamed, and was persecuted and punished for something that we don't believe it was responsible for. We believe that the Holy Dingo is a kind of the summary in essence of the goodness and of the maternal and paternal love of the great Spirit for all people...the Holy Dingo, we believe, didn't eat the child, but we believe the Holy Dingo saved this child from the fate of being brought up as a Seventh-Day Adventist... So, the Holy Dingo is central to our theology, and is the symbol of the stigmatised, just as lesbians and gays are stigmatised...in an unfair way.

*Some gay liberationists think that in order to change society, it is not helpful to try to seek reform in established institutions like religion and law - and instead, that social change is best brought about by revolution, or taking down the institutions and destroying them. What do you think?*

No, well, I've opted to stay within an institutional way of bringing about change, but fortunately, with the Sisters I've got another part of my life which moves right away from that idea, of reforming of an institution. I suppose I've got the best of both worlds, in a way, because the Sisters don't insist that I abandon the Anglican Church, and the Anglican Church...would like very much for me to abandon it - but just my being there, it's enough of an irritant. I don't know about our capacity to reform and change it, it's probably negligible, and given the track record of a group like AngGays, which had 12 years of Anglican lesbian and gay activism within the church, we achieved a great deal, but we haven't brought about any 'topend' change of the Anglican Church.

*So what happened with AngGays?*

AngGays had a fairly clear purpose, that it was to educate the Church, and strengthen gays and lesbians, and also to be a support group on a one-to-one basis for lesbian and gay Anglicans within the parishes, and then - wherever we felt confident enough - to take very confrontational stances within our own Church... So one of the last things we did, before we folded last year - due to exhaustion and small numbers - was, we went to the General Synod Service in St Andrew's Cathedral, where our diocese was hosting representatives from the Australian-wide Anglican Church... We wore 'Gay and Christian' T-shirts, and we went up publicly to receive Communion, which placed the Archbishop of Sydney and

anyone serving Communion to us, in a position where they had to publicly step back from implementing their own very clearly stated rule, that 'No non-repentant homosexual person or anyone who promotes the acceptance of such people can receive Communion or participate in the Ministry of the Church.' They endorsed that view in 1985, publicly. In other words, all...such people must be barred from every single ministry within the Diocese - everything... And here they were in their most public cathedral of the Diocese, surrounded by the Australian Anglican Church... Of course they didn't have the guts to deny us Communion... If they'd denied us Communion, I just would've stayed at the altar rails until they gave it to me... I would've remained at the altar rails for the entire duration of the service, even if I had to be physically dragged out. So, they did their typical Anglican Diocese of Sydney thing, they ran away from challenges that are public... on a one-to-one basis they're quite happy to knock anyone on the head that they can get away with, but publicly, they're gutless. And some of them would justify it and say, 'Oh well, Holy Communion is not the place for political demonstrations, and we're not going to buy into your little game and deny you Communion.' I would say, if they really believed in their point of view, they would seek out the most public way of saying, 'These people are not part of the Christian community.' But of course they opted out...

*So the fact that AngGays did eventually fold shows a disillusionment in people trying to work within the institution?*

Maybe not disillusionment, but exhaustion. And the difficulty of working within the institution... We were offering not a ghetto, a little community to escape to - we never did that, we never had worship together, except for once a year, for a Christmas service or something like that, very low-key, and we had our meetings and we had our political activity, and our one-to-one support activity, and our educational activity...we participated with the lesbian and gay community, the political community, socially, the Mardi Gras - we did everything. Half a dozen people did that for 12 years, with a wider support community of maybe 30 or 40 people. It just became exhausting, and people moved on... So the group just was not able to sustain any further activity. And we knew that we'd give great satisfaction to the Diocese to know that we were finished, 'cause there was no longer any existing group that claimed to be Anglican, and working within the Church. And that was our strength, we never set foot outside the Church, we were always locked right within the structures of the Church and within parish communities... The evidence we have after 12 years is that people find it too difficult to remain within their parish communities, and they leave... We have to be quite realistic about the fact that more than likely, most people will want the easier way of coping, which is to leave, or to opt for going to church and maintaining a completely separate private life...

There are still plenty of parishes where...homophobic ministers are able to peddle the same old lies about lesbian and gay people... In the so-called 'growth areas', that's the worry, the Diocese is already there, making sure that the people it puts there are going to push the line that

the Anglican Church is all about the Nuclear Family, and conservative middle-class values, and maintaining the status quo... It's such a pity that...we can't disrupt that process any more. After 12 years we no longer are able to go to the media and say, 'AngGays, Anglican lesbians and gays, yes, we are part of the Church.' And of course, they could never question our credentials, because we were active members of the parishes we belonged to - for 9 years I was actually on the Synod... All they could say was 'Well, we don't like it,' and the media could say, 'Oi, you don't like it, but it exists, you've got people who are stating the opposite to what you're saying, and they're in your own authoritative decision-making bodies.' And that's why I think the Anglican Church has a lot more chance of doing this thing of reform within the institution, because it has democratic structures, that are not accessible to, say, the Roman Catholics.

***I am proud of the lesbian and gay community, I'm proud that our community hasn't let itself be co-opted by the religious moralists, and that even in this great crisis, we have been able to believe in ourselves, and not run off to the religious institutions to offer us easy answers...***

***Was there any opposition to the recent One In Seven paint-bombings<sup>1</sup>, from gay liberationists who are worried that this sort of thing will generate negative publicity about the gay community?***

There might have been, but I wouldn't say from gay liberationists, but certainly from gay people; there were people who said 'This is not good, this will inhibit the process of change,' and they're free to say that... If the action hadn't been done, there'd be nothing to talk about. There'd be just the same old so-called quiet process of revolution and reform within the institutions. And there's no evidence that that's bringing about a change which is quick enough, which is actually tangible. And I think that that sort of change is much more fragile, unless it's really to do with education. Now in our parish, if the Diocese attempted to clean out the parish...and got rid of active gay people, there would be so much support now...the [parish] community would know what was going on, and they would go clunk! into the strongest wall of opposition to that type of homophobia... Sure there'd be people who'd allow it to happen because they...wouldn't believe that the Diocese could be that negative and destructive and vindictive. But I can say that the institution can be vindictive, and it can be destructive, and power, in the hands of institutional Anglicans, can be a vicious suppressive and oppressive weapon against... the working of the love of God in the community, and it must be fought...

***Nowadays, are people actually becoming more conservative in their behaviour, or in their general attitudes, because of the threat of AIDS?***

Well, no... I think that we've found resources within our community to deal with both the educational side and the caring side, but those resources are being stretched and strained, and some of those people are marvellous - people need to be given a rest from this type of work... because they're getting exhausted - some of them have given up jobs...so as to work within the area of AIDS full-time, and that's a remarkable sacrifice. In fact, if anything has been learnt from the virus, it's that the gay and lesbian community has found resources within itself that it may not have been aware of, for extraordinary degrees of unselfishness, of compassion, of bravery, and they've fought off moralism. The easy trap that we could fall into, would be to say, 'Oh, we shouldn't have been living this way.' No. The community seems to have had the maturity and the courage to be able to say, 'It's a virus, that's what it is, and we'll deal with it as a medical condition, and we'll work to prevent it, and we'll care for those who are living with it...' And that's great... The great issues that have challenged the lesbian and gay community have been dealt with without falling into escapist, moralistic religion. And I think that's wonderful. I am proud of the lesbian and gay community, I'm proud that our community hasn't let itself be co-opted by the religious moralists, and that even in this great crisis, we have been able to believe in ourselves, and not run off to the religious institutions to offer us easy answers...

*And the final plea, is that if anyone is interested in a challenging, affectionate relationship with a 41-year-old, exhausted Anglican activist, who's a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence - I like accordion-playing, cycling, cooking - they can make applications to: PO Box 426, Grosvenor Place, Sydney 2000. And all nationalities welcome.*

1 On 8 April 1991, the gay activist group One In Seven splashed red paint on 11 buildings around Sydney. The buildings targeted - including St Mary's and St Andrew's Cathedrals, Parliament House, the TEN network offices - represented institutions responsible for perpetuating the systemic oppression of lesbian/gay people, and the red paint symbolised the blood of the lesbians and gays who have suffered violence or oppression. By discriminating against lesbians and gays, eg. in legislation, or in Church policy, or by showing indifference, such as the omission of gay/lesbian-related material from State school curricula, these institutions are seen to be guilty of condoning or promoting hatred and violence against lesbian/gay people, hence the symbolic blood-splattering. This confrontational act of 'civil disobedience' was in response to several recent 'gay hate' killings around Sydney, and, in fact, it purposely coincided with the sentencing of several people charged with one of these killings; the action sought to attract public attention and promote discussion about such issues, especially at such an appropriate time.