

A born-and-bred atheist, **Rex Wockner** was once a Catholic **Cardinal Sins**

At the age of 22, I came out of the closet and got un-engaged from my girlfriend, Pam. Some months later, perplexed about the meaning of life, I became a Roman Catholic and got re-engaged to Pam. Later still, probably to dis-engage from Pam for good, I entered the Catholic seminary.

Once there, I soon found Western philosophy much more interesting than Thomistic theology and ultimately realised that Catholicism is incoherent on an intellectual level. I left the seminary, re-converted to atheism, tore Pam's page out of my address book and finally became a news reporter for a major metropolitan gay newspaper, *Chicago Outlines*. On December 10 last year, I was sent to cover a story at a Catholic cathedral. The *deja vu* was a touch distressing.

On that day, 4,500 gay-rights, pro-abortion and Aids activists descended on New York's St Patrick's Cathedral during a solemn pontifical mass celebrated by Cardinal John O'Connor. The protesters were members of the Aids Coalition To Unleash Power, or Act Up, a group of militant homosexuals who believe that the government, scientific establishment and pharmaceutical industry do not care if they die of Aids.

For nearly four hours, the demonstrators blocked sidewalks and streets, chanting such things as: 'You say don't fuck, we say fuck you' and 'Keep your mass off our ass'. Sixty-eight of the demonstrators were arrested.

New Yorkers and the media are used to these tactics from Act Up and do not pay much attention to what was considered shocking less than three years ago. That is probably why 100 of the protesters opted to break new ground, landing themselves on the front pages of the newspapers for the next week.

As the irreverent demonstration continued, the 100 militants, disguised as Christians, went inside to stop mass. They sat quietly until O'Connor began his homily and then suddenly handcuffed themselves to the pews, denounced the cardinal as a hypocrite and a

murderer, and conducted a 'die-in' in the aisles.

Mass came to a halt. Slowly, police moved in and started cutting the protestors loose and carting them off on orange stretchers. After about 10 minutes, O'Connor resumed mass, moving directly to the liturgy of the Eucharist. When he reached the revered point where Catholics believe a priest turns bread and wine into Jesus Christ's body and blood, the remaining activists drowned out his words with their shouts.

Some moments later, Act Up member Tom Keane went to communion but rather than eating Jesus' body, smashed it up and threw it on the floor. Several priests dived to clean up the scattered remains, finally carrying them to the sacristy in their cupped hands.

New Yorkers and the media were shocked, and the disruption and desecration dominated the city's consciousness for a week. To Act Up's surprise, the actions of the 100 militants were also denounced by several mainstream lesbian and gay organisations.

As the media orgy spun out of control, Act Up explained that its purpose was to confront the Catholic Church's dangerous meddling in secular affairs. In principle, the US constitution mandates complete separation of church and state, and it is not unusual, for example, to see atheists legally force the removal of manger scenes from public properties around Christmas time.

In the past four years, O'Connor, the US Catholic Church and the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Inquisition) have aggressively stepped up their public attacks on gay sex, abortion and, most notably, the use of condoms.

In the minds of Act Up members, O'Connor's uncompromising public railing against condom use by anyone in any circumstances are the straw that broke the camel's back. In the midst of the Aids crisis, they say, that makes the powerful and influential cardinal a murderer.



Acting up in church

It's very rare that I feel uneasy before an assignment - no matter how important the event or people - but I had been *not* looking forward to the St Patrick's demo for weeks. The issue was not so much that I hadn't been inside a Catholic church since 1984 - when I left the seminary after deciding, one by one, that gay sex is good, that the pope is not infallible, that Catholic dogmas on Jesus' divinity are internally contradictory, and, finally, that a casual look at the world I live in suggests that the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent god of Christianity does not exist. By now, my Catholic days safely seem like life on

another planet.

The lingering problem for me has been a single isolated emotion that has hung around for the past six years - a thankfully infrequent sick feeling in my gut that I was sure would surge up during the St Patrick's Cathedral mass.

Both of my seminaries - St Meinrad College in Indiana, and the University of St Mary of the Lake in Illinois - were 60% to 70% gay. About half of the gay men - 30% to 35% of the students - were out of the closet. At St Meinrad, we were called 'The Family'. We had regular tables at the campus pub, the Unstable.

Later, the year I was at St

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Mary of the Lake, tensions between gay and straight students exploded and we had a major campus symposium at which the straights were told by seminary officials to be more tolerant of the gays. Among much else, heterosexuals were angry about the seminary double-standard. Gay students, they pointed out, were permitted discreet romantic affairs, while straights were questioned when they brought women to the dormitory.

This is also, of course, how matters stand today in the Archdiocese of New York. Father Andrew Greeley, a heterosexual, wrote an article last autumn for the *National Catholic Reporter*, complaining that Catholic rectories are becoming 'lavender houses'. He complained about a 'national network' of actively homosexual clergy. Father is a little slow to catch on to trends; the network has had a newsletter for years.

Knowing all this, and more, there I was at mass in St Patrick's Cathedral. As the throngs of concelebrating priests process directly past the media corner, I look directly at each one and *know* that many are gay (gay radar). In a way, this is neither a big deal nor hot news. Who cares what Father does with his willy anyway?

But with my personal history and my double-insider's perspective, all I saw was my gay friends sitting out in the congregation fighting for their lives and then the gay priests (whose justifications and excuses I know intimately) standing up at the altar lending support to the church's deadly anti-condom campaign. I felt sick again. But even more, I felt embarrassed and sorry ever to have been connected with such an unconscionably hypocritical institution.

I flashed back to the week at St Mary's of the Lake when two of the deacons who were going to take their vows of celibacy a few days later were caught having sex at the 'glory holes' at the porno bookstore just over the Wisconsin state line on Interstate Highway 94.

Humans are by nature con-

tradictory. Many of us probably have things in our past or present similar to being a sexually-active celibate who preaches against condoms but uses them. If it weren't for the sick feeling in my gut, I'd probably just let the matter drop, and leave the gay priests to bask in their hard-won integration of contradictions. I'd justify my silence with the logic that gay priests are no more screwed up than many other people.

But according to the 'Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator' - a psychological test the seminary gave me - I'm a 'feeler', not a 'thinker'. And my emotions sided with Act Up and its chant, 'You say don't fuck, we say fuck you'.

America has grown used to hearing Act Up chant and shout at government bureaucrats, drug-company executives and ego-driven scientists: 'We die, they do nothing! We die, they do nothing!' But in the case of these priests, it's something worse: We die, and our gay brothers help reload the rifles.

Reflecting back the next day on this hyper-hypocrisy that has haunted me for seven years, I began to feel that smashing up a piece of transubstantiated Jesus had been a very restrained protest. As politicians and gay leaders tripped up over each other attacking Act Up for daring to take its anger *inside* the cathedral, I realised that my shock lay in the opposite direction. I was surprised somebody hadn't dynamited the whole tabernacle.

That might have begun to address *my* emotions about just how evil it is for this quintessentially hypocritical church to try to insert its bizarre and discredited theology into sound public-health policy.

'O'Connor, you're a murderer!' one Act Up-er shouted at the cardinal as he transubstantiated the wafers into Jesus. A murderer - I'm now more sure than ever - who rules over a den of hypocritical disciples worshipping their own convoluted logic of self-justification. It still turns my stomach.