



Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

by Robert Kellerman

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is a San Francisco-based organization, composed primarily of gay men, who appear publicly in drag, dressed as nuns. They participate in a host of charity functions and political events.

The Sisters model themselves after Roman Catholic religious orders, appropriating not only the nun's habit but also an active order's emphasis on community outreach, education, and service. The Sisters have spread beyond San Francisco, establishing sister houses in other cities in the world.

Origins

The Sisters originated with three gay men in 1979, who wanted to combine radical politics, street theater, and high camp. Having obtained nuns' habits from a community theater production of *The Sound of Music*, these men (a.k.a., Sister Missionary Position, Sister Adhanarisvara, and Sister Roz Erection) became a frequent sight in San Francisco.

Appearing regularly in their habits, they attracted much attention and gained converts at the annual Castro Street Fair, held in the center of San Francisco's gayest neighborhood.

Organization and Mission

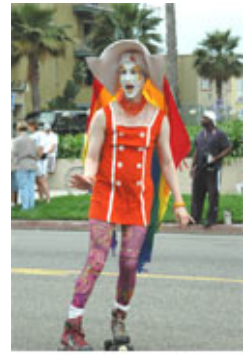
Promoting a sex-positive philosophy, "Give up the guilt," the group organized as an order in 1980 and were incorporated in 1986. Each professed nun takes a religious name (usually irreverent and hilarious), such as, for example, Sisters Missionary Position, Florence Nightmare, Psychedelia, Hellen Wheels, Dana Van Iniquity, and Hysterectoria, among the milder choices.

Although originally founded as an "Order of Gay Male Nuns," the group now includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and transgendered men and women. Many of their rituals are influenced by Eastern religious practices and beliefs, as well as by Roman Catholicism. Their doctrine stresses universal joy and the expiation of guilt.

Community Service

Appearing regularly at street fairs and gay pride events, the Sisters of the mother chapter organize and take part in many services to San Francisco's large and diverse queer community.

In 1982, they created *Play Fair*, the first sex-positive safer sex pamphlet of the AIDS crisis. In 1983, they organized the first AIDS candlelight vigil. They have held ongoing fundraisers for the AIDS Memorial Quilt; for the annual Halloween celebrations in the Castro district; for Project Open Hand, an organization that



Two Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence at Long Beach Pride in 2006 photographed by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

provides meals to homebound people with HIV and AIDS; and for conferences and alternative proms for queer youth.

They even hold weekly bingo games in local churches to help fund local charities and non-profit organizations.

Controversy

The group has frequently raised the ire of many Catholics, who believe that the Sisters mock the beliefs and rituals of the Church. The Pope placed the order on the Papal List of Heretics upon his visit to San Francisco in 1987, when the Sisters showed up to greet him by staging a ritual exorcism.

In 1999, the Sisters' Easter Sunday street party to "celebrate two decades of decadence" angered the Archdiocese of San Francisco, which has consistently condemned the order, charging it with insensitivity and sacrilege.

Some U. S. Senators attempted to justify their opposition to the confirmation of openly gay ambassadorial nominee, James Hormel, on the basis that he refused to condemn the Sisters as "anti-Catholic."

Despite the controversy associated with the Sisters, their message of community service and pleasure has spread across the globe. Chapters have been established in Sydney (1981), Seattle (1987), London (1990), Paris (1991), Los Angeles (1995), and in other cities. Sisters in each chapter wear a distinctive garb and cultivate their own political and spiritual activities.

Bibliography

Key, Sr. Ann R., and Sr. Phyllis Stein the Fragrant. "Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence." *Gay Histories and Cultures*. George R. Haggerty, ed. New York: Garland, 2000. 822-823.

"Sisters' Stage a Party and Infuriate Catholics." *New York Times* (April 5, 1999): late ed., A15.

"The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Inc." www.thesisters.org.

About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.