John McNeill, the Catholic theologian "of the liberation of homosexuals and his "Taking a Chance on God"

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Lidia Borghi's interview with John McNeill, 17 October 2012

Former Jesuit priest John McNeill has been a pioneer of LGBT Christian liberation movement all over the world. A native of Buffalo (NY), born in 1925, he suffered a harsh imprisonment in Europe during the Second World War. Always aware of his homosexual orientation, he became a priest of the Catholic Church in 1948 and was defrocked nearly forty years later due to his job as a psychotherapist and councelor for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. "Taking a Chance on God" is a documentary film that Irish director Brendan Fay wrote, produced and directed.

It chronicles McNeill's life and actions and, through a series of interviews interspersed with photographs and precious period films, it depicts the main phases of the pastoral care that the man still carries out for lots of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders he meets along his way in order to help them get rid of the heavy yoke of discrimination and exclusion that the Catholic Church has laid on their shoulders.
This kind of pastoral service goes by the name of liberation theology that McNeill has expounded in his book "The Church and Homosexuality", which was published in Italy in 1979 and has never been reprinted since then. Between the end of July and the end of August 2012, John McNeill and Brendan Fay made me a gift of the two following interviews.

Taking a Chance on God is for the LG worldwide community an extreme important visual document.Please tell me how it was born: how long did it take to complete it?

The documentary, Taking a Chance on God, is the creation of Brendan Fay. Once he completed his documentary on Mychal Judge; Saint of 9/11, he began to produce a documentary on my life as a gay man and priest. It has been six years in the making.

What about the people who gave their personal contributions, with their precious work, to make it, such as the film director Brendan Fay?

Brendan's six years of work was a gift of love. He received no or very little, financial help. His only motivation came from his zeal to achieve justice for lgbt people to offset the injustice done by Vatican teaching.

Taking a Chance on God is about the story of a gay man, who just after the Second World war, decided to join the Catholic Church. Then what happened?

After my term as a prisoner of war in Germany during WW 11, I discerned that God was calling me to the priesthood. I entered the Jesuit order in 1948 and was forty years a member of the Jesuits until my expulsion in 1988.
After my ordination, again through discernment of spirits, I felt called by God to undertake a special ministry to lgbt people. I helped found Dignity, an organization for Catholic gays (now forty years in existence).
The general of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, approved that ministry, and gave me an imprimi potest for my first book on gay issues, The Church and the Homosexual, in 1976. The Vatican reacted badly and ordered me to silence. After nine years of silence, with the arrival of the AIDS epidemic I could no longer remain silent in conscience.
I then published Taking a Chance on God, (translated in Italian as Scometerre su Dio in 1994). Shortly thereafter the Vatican ordered my expulsion from the Jesuits. Subsequently, I published Freedom, Glorious Freedom, (translated as Libertà, Gloriosa Libertà,1996), my autobiography: Both Feet Firmly Planted in Midair: My Spiritual Journey, and finally, Sex As God Intended :A Reflection on Human Sexuality As Play.2008).

The message of love and inclusion in Taking a Chance on God can be spread with the donations, which through the official site of the video can be effected to support a very expensive project. Can you please explain?

Brendan and I believe that my documentary:Taking a Chance on God could serve as an instrument for the Holy Spirit to bring about the spiritual liberation of thousands of lgbt people. To make the documentary available Brendan needs to raise at least 50,000 dollars to pay the networks for excerpts he uses, to pay for translations, distribution, etc.

During the next autumn the documentary film about your life will arrive in Italy and will be screened in some cinemas, thanks to the volunteers in the Forum of Italian Homosexual Christians. How do you feel realizing that your personal life will be so helpful to many lesbian and gay people who live their tormented relationship with God, because of the social stigma which the Church spreads against them?

The documentary will play at a film festival in Florence on October 25, 2012. My heart is full of gratitude to God who is using this documentary on my life to bring liberation and joy to the hearts of my gay brothers and sisters.

The filmmakers of Taking A Chance on God

Brendan Fay: Director, Writer and Producer
Ilene Cutler: Producer and Editor
Dan Messina: Editor and Co-Writer
Peter Wetzler: Composer

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