recent articles in such diverse publications as Newsweek, Atlantic Monthly, and National Catholic Reporter have called public attention to a phenomenon that used to be spoken of only by innuendo or in whispers: gay priests and gay seminarians.

Now no sensible person — and I hope I fall in that category — would enter a discussion of this sort without a good deal of hesitation. It is not the sort of terrain one ordinarily chooses to cross, at least not without an ample supply of protective gear and a painful awareness of the suspicions and misunderstandings that can be provoked by almost anything one says. My own reflections, I should underline, are highly tentative and not offered *motu proprio*, as it were, but in response to an inquiry by the editors. I am sure that this article will set a new Commonweal record for Most Question Marks; it contains, by contrast, very few answers. Nonetheless, these are questions that must be articulated and addressed, however haltingly. The alternative is leaving them to gossip, to unexamined, closed-door decisions, or to policy by default.

In fact, a long list of questions is being widely, if sometimes furtively, raised today.

- How many priests and seminarians are gay? How many of those are active homosexuals? What difference, if any, does the sexual orientation of a priest have on his pastoral ministry? Does it affect the gay priest’s ministerial relations with heterosexual males, with women, with families, and with children? How does his homosexuality affect his relationship with heterosexual priests? Does the nature of these various relationships differ if the gay priest is sexually inactive rather than sexually active?
- If there is, in fact, a large body of gay priests in the United States, is there any relation between this phenomenon and the increasing visibility of child-molestation cases involving Catholic clergy?

- What impact, if any, does the large number of gay priests have on recruiting candidates for the ordained priesthood, or the presbyterate? Has the public image of the Catholic priest in the United States changed in recent years, and, if so, to what extent is homosexuality in the priesthood a factor?
- Has the percentage of gay men attracted to the ordained priesthood increased in recent years? Are there more gays in the seminary today than there were in the years before Vatican II?
- What impact does the presence of a large number of gay seminarians have on the spiritual tone and moral atmosphere of our seminaries? Do gay seminarians inevitably create a gay culture in seminaries? To what extent are seminary faculty members a part of this culture? Are heterosexual seminarians “turned off” by the existence of such a culture? How many heterosexual seminarians have decided to leave the seminary and abandon their interest in a presbyteral vocation because of the presence of significant numbers of gays in seminaries and among the local clergy?
- Does the gay culture exist within diocesan and religious presbyterates? Is there a social bond of any kind among gay priests beyond the boundaries of the diocese or the religious community, nationally and internationally?
- How many U.S. Catholic bishops are homosexual? Do homosexual bishops give preference, consciously or not, to gay candidates for choice pastorates and diocesan positions? Is homosexuality a factor at all in the appointment of bishops themselves?
- Is there any relationship between the hierarchy’s criticism and disciplining of gay rights groups, such as Dignity, and the presence of gays in the priesthood itself, including the episcopate? Do some gay priests and gay bishops actually take a harder line against out-of-the-closet homosexuals than do heterosexual priests and bishops?
- Of the thousands of priests who have resigned from the active ministry since Vatican II, how many of those priests were gay? Have gay priests left the priesthood in any significant numbers?
- What impact, if any, does the presence of gay priests...
have on pressures for change in the church’s discipline of obligatory celibacy for priests? Are gay priests, as a group, generally in favor of optional celibacy? Are gay priests opposed to the ordination of women to any greater degree than are heterosexual priests? Is there any discernible pattern to the opinions of gay priests not only on matters like optional celibacy and the ordination of women, but on the whole range of official teachings concerning sexual ethics?

- Are gay priests theologically more conservative or more progressive than heterosexual priests? Or is there no noticeable difference between the two groups? Are gay seminarians and gay priests drawn to the study and practice of liturgy more than are heterosexual seminarians and priests? Is the liturgical interest of gay seminarians and gay priests different from that of their heterosexual brethren? Is there a discernible gay influence on parish liturgy, seminary liturgy, college liturgy, and the liturgy celebrated in religious communities?

- Are gay seminarians and gay priests more, or less, committed to the church’s social teachings than are their heterosexual brothers? Are gay seminarians and gay priests, more, or less, interested in politics, and in questions of social justice, human rights, and peace, than are heterosexual seminarians and priests? Are they more attuned to the needs of AIDS victims?

- How has the phenomenon of gay priests and gay seminarians manifested itself in other Christian traditions? How does its manifestation within these other communities differ from its manifestation within the Catholic church in the United States?

We don’t have the answers to most of these questions. Too much research remains to be done. And some answers, it perhaps goes without saying, are simply beyond the capacity of ordinary research methods.

After all, how does one calculate the number of gay priests? Many gay priests don’t even know they’re gay, or cannot admit it to themselves and others.

How does one measure the impact of a gay priest on a parish community? Or on his relations with heterosexual males and with women?

How can one determine the number of young heterosexual men who have left the seminary because of the gay-culture problem or who, for similar reasons, have not seriously considered a presbyteral vocation?

It is clear from the very listing of all these questions that the phenomenon of gay priests and gay seminarians is exceedingly complex. It cannot be studied from within a single scientific discipline.

It needs first, and most obviously, the skills of trained sociologists, people who know how to gather and sift through data and then make some coherent sense of it all.

It needs, secondly, the insights of psychologists, professionals who can help us understand the polarities between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and between active and inactive human sexuality, as well as the ways, healthy and unhealthy alike, enabling and manipulative alike, in which individuals relate to one another.

The phenomenon of gay priests and gay seminarians needs, thirdly, the input of historians, both of the church and of culture, in order to situate the phenomenon in a wider context.

It needs, fourthly, the scholarly judgments of Christian ethicists and moral theologians, because the issues of human sexuality, and of homosexuality in particular, are not without profound moral content.

It needs, fifthly, the expertise of biblical scholars, since so many of the moral pronouncements on these matters presuppose particular interpretations of the classic scriptural references to homosexuality and homosexual behavior.

It needs, finally, the input of ecclesiologists, for the questions posed above concern the nature of the communities we call parishes and dioceses, and the purpose of the church’s ministries within these communities.

Whatever limited measure of competence I may enjoy is in the last of these disciplines. I should hope, however, that representatives of the other disciplines, particularly sociology and psychology, will continue to contribute to the clarification of this complex phenomenon.

It is as an ecclesiologist, therefore, and not as a sociologist, psychologist, historian, ethicist, or biblical scholar, that I offer the following observations:

1. Ministry is always for the sake of the church, never for the sake of the individual minister. Thus, one doesn’t become a minister to become a minister. One becomes a minister to do ministry.

Over the course of time, the presbyteral ministry has been transformed into something one aspires to rather than something to which one is called. In the earliest days of the church, individuals had to be coaxed, sometimes even cajoled, into entering presbyteral and especially episcopal ministry. The community, in the first instance, discerned the presence of the appropriate charisms and human qualities in one or another of the baptized, and then proceeded to apply every legitimate pressure upon the designee.

Today it works in just the opposite fashion. Young men (and, more frequently than before, older, “second-career”
men) simply decide that they’d like to be a priest, and apply to a bishop, a seminary, or a religious community. Given the shortage of presbyterial vocations, a persistent and enterprising applicant can eventually find a place that will take him. In the absence of serious academic deficiencies or undeniably overt pathological behavior, the candidate will advance inexorably from first-year philosophy (or theology) to ordination and a pastoral assignment.

It is no secret that a least some of these applicants are not attracted primarily by the work of the presbyterial ministry but by the status and freedom from the ordinary demands of life that ordained ministry has often conferred.

Indeed, it is not inconceivable that the ordained priesthood is attractive to certain people precisely because it excludes marriage. To put it plainly: as long as the church requires celibacy for the ordained priesthood, the priesthood will always pose a particular attraction for gay men who are otherwise not drawn to ministry in general or to the presbyteral ministry in particular.

2. The evidence we do have at hand suggests that obligatory celibacy is the most significant negative factor in the recent decline in vocations to the presbyterian ministry.

By no serious standard — biblical, theological, doctrinal, sociological, psychological, historical — can celibacy be described as an essential requirement for effective presbyteral service. The original apostles were married, and so were priests and bishops for several of the earliest centuries of the church’s history. To this day, Catholic priests in other rites are married, and the Latin-rite church itself has recently admitted former Episcopal priests into the Catholic priesthood, allowing them to function as married priests.

But only heterosexual priests, seminarians, and potential candidates would be interested in marrying. It is a matter of simple logic that the more gays we have in the priesthood and in our seminaries, the less pressure there will be, from within the body of Catholic clergy itself, for a fundamental change in the present discipline of obligatory celibacy.

The Catholic church’s continued resistance to change will, in turn, accelerate the current trend wherein heterosexual males are deciding in ever-increasing numbers not even to consider the priesthood as a life-long ministerial vocation.

The church will have to draw increasingly from the homosexual community for its priests and seminarians, whether it likes it or not, and whether it wants to admit it or not. And in a society where homosexuality continues to be stigmatized, the celibate priesthood can offer an esteemed and rewarding profession in which “unmarried and uninterested” status is self-explanatory and excites neither curiosity nor suspicion.

3. The presbyteral ministry is sacramental in more than the conventional sense, i.e., as a dispenser of sacraments. The ordained priesthood is also sacramental in a deeper theological sense: the priest, like the bishop, must embody the sacred realities with which he deals every day.

In the ordination rite the bishop is urged to remind the ordinandi: “Let the example of your life attract the followers of Christ, so that by word and action you may build up the house which is God’s church.”

Can a gay priest fulfill such a mandate? In principle, why not? The church does not condemn the homosexual; it censures only homosexual behavior. Individuals, including those otherwise heterosexual, may choose homosexual behavior; but no one — homosexual or heterosexual — chooses his or her underlying sexual predisposition. Homosexuals are human beings and Christians, whose dignity must be respected; and it is a sad sign of our failings as Christian people that we need to underline something so elementary.

Homosexuals who are not sexually active and who otherwise have all the necessary charisms and skills for presbyteral ministry have as much “right” to present themselves for ordination as heterosexual candidates. Indeed, some inactive homosexuals may be better qualified for ministry than some of their heterosexual counterparts. The issue here is ministerial aptitude, not sexual orientation — unless the latter should interfere with the former. But that is a matter for the church to determine, and if the church needs specialized guidance, it can turn to psychologists, not moral theologians.

If, on the other hand, active homosexuals are admitted and retained in the presbyteral ministry, and if their behavior should become known, then the principle of sacramentality is engaged. The actively gay priest sends a morally mixed message to the church and to the wider human community, to say the least.

We can’t have it both ways. We cannot continue to denounce homosexual behavior in our official teachings and disciplinary decrees, and then adopt an inexplicably lax approach to the scrutiny of candidates for admission to our seminaries and for ordination. And that, of course, “goes double” for candidates for the episcopacy. We cannot say one thing in our doctrinal statements and countenance something entirely opposed to them in our church leaders.

4. By itself, the ordination of women would have no major impact on the phenomenon of gay priests and gay seminarians. Without a change in the discipline of obligatory celibacy, opening the priesthood to women could intensify the phenomenon, excluding heterosexual women for whom marriage is a serious option, and possibly resulting in an influx of lesbian priests and lesbian seminarians.

The editors asked specifically if I might have “any ecclesial reflections” to propose. I should say that I agree entirely with the central finding of a new and important study by Dean R. Hoge, of the department of sociology at the Catholic University of America, to be published in the fall by Sheed & Ward: The Future of Catholic Leadership: Responses to the Priest Shortage.

Dr. Hoge concludes that the shortage of priests in the United States is an institutional problem, not a spiritual problem. As such, it cannot be solved by prayer, fasting, and penance. To the extent that potential candidates are steering clear of the
ordained priesthood because of obligatory celibacy, or the manner in which authority is exercised in the church, or for any similar institutional reason, the current shortage can only be corrected by institutional means.

At the top of the means-list, in my judgment, is the elimination of obligatory celibacy. No single institutional change would have more far-reaching effects on the composition and shape of the Catholic priesthood in the United States.

The repeal of the discipline of obligatory celibacy would remove one of the primary motives for the resignation of priests from the active ministry. Secondly, it would expand the pool of potential candidates for the ordained priesthood. (Dean Hoge notes that "the celibacy requirement is the single most important deterrent to new vocations to the priesthood, and if it were removed, the flow of men into seminaries would increase greatly, maybe fourfold.")

Thirdly, it would help correct the public’s longstanding and deeply rooted perception of the Catholic church as a religion that regards sex as a necessary evil — the principal moral barrier standing between God and humankind. Obviously, these are serious reasons for the repeal of obligatory celibacy, and they exist quite apart from any questions raised about homosexuality and the clergy. But fourthly, and finally, such a repeal would remove all ambiguity from the vocational decisions of homosexuals. They would clearly choose the presbyteral ministry for the sake of the church, and not for what it might offer in terms of occupational respectability and freedom from social suspicion.

This essay has consisted of questions, hypotheses, tentative observations, and only one hard-and-fast proposal. It is not the last word on the subject, by any means. But the essay will have had at least some modest success if it should move the discussion forward by coaxing responsible parties, bishops especially, to confront the phenomenon of gay priests and gay seminarians more openly and more forthrightly, and then to do something about it.

As Dean Hoge argues in his book, to choose none of the available options (his book examines eleven) is to allow one of two fundamentally unacceptable options to prevail by default: either local communities will simply have to get along without the Eucharist, or lay members themselves will assume eucharistic leadership, with the result that Catholicism in the United States will gradually be replaced by a new form of American high-church congregationalism.

The Catholic church in the United States cannot afford either course.

THE POOR BREAK THROUGH

SOLILQXY FROM NEW DELHI

was walking in Connaught Circus, the "fashionable" shopping area of New Delhi, the other day, trying to figure out how I had spent ninety-five rupees in less than six hours. Twelve for the taxi, five for the coffee, five for the postcards, five for the magazine, twenty-eight for the pants, five for the ice cream. It all added up to sixty rupees, plus the fifteen I had in my pocket made seventy-five. But I knew I had started out with nearly a hundred. Let's go over it again. Twelve for the taxi, five for the coffee... I was interrupted by a beggar and the irony did not fail to strike me. My situation suddenly seemed preposterous.

She was a tiny shriveled woman holding the smallest baby I had ever seen. "How old is she?" I asked. "Six days." Six days! Six-days-old and out on the streets earning a living. And the mother, underweight, no doubt anemic, six-days-post-partum and already on her feet, looking for the next meal. I thought of my two children, born into health and warmth and security, and of myself, in for a week after their deliveries, waited on by family and friends.

I have lived in India for nearly six years now and I am no closer to understanding poverty than I was the day I arrived. Perhaps I am further away. Then at least, I was full of innocence and rage, grieved by everything I saw, moved to impossible gestures. Now, a bit jaded, a lot numb, and more and more caught up in my life and its complications (children, a home, work), I notice less.

But still, the poor break through. One day, the face of a child or an old man's smile will touch some unguarded spot in my heart, and down go the gates and I am flooded again. I never know what to do then. I invariably do too much in the beginning and too little in the end. I finish feeling vexed and dissatisfied and determined to find some better way. So far, I am still searching.

One day in January I was preparing lunch for my children and our houseguest, Alison, a young woman from Connecticut. She thought she heard a baby crying and went to the

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