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# HOMOSEXUALITY & THE PRIESTHOOD

QUESTIONS WE CAN'T KEEP IN THE CLOSET

RICHARD P. McBRIEN

**R**ecent 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?

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● 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?

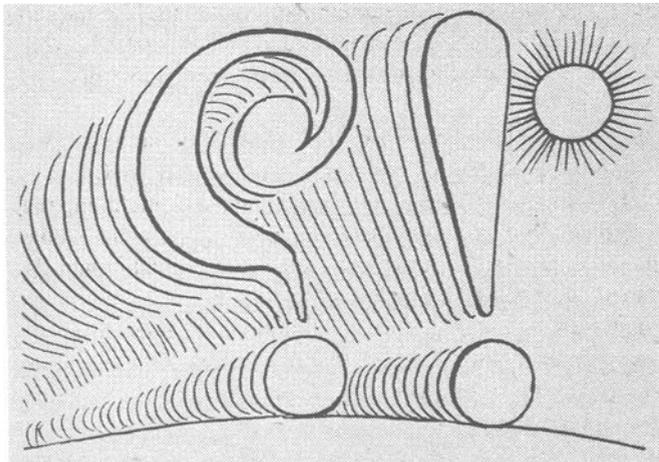
● Are gay seminarians and gay priests more, or less, committed to the church's social teachings than are their heterosexual brothers? Are gay seminarians and gay priests, more, or less, interested in politics, and in questions of social justice, human rights, and peace, than are heterosexual seminarians and priests? Are they more attuned, and more pastorally sensitive, 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 in these other communities differ from its manifestation within the Catholic church in the United States?

**W**e 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.

**I**t 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 presbyteral 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 at least some of these applicants are not attracted primarily by the work of the presbyteral 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 presbyteral 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.

**T**he 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.

**T**he 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

