

A Dangerous Closet

A psychologist argues that the Catholic Church's message to gay priests - that homosexuality should be a shameful secret - contributed to the sexual abuse scandal.

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The Catholic Church's position on homosexuality eventually might take its place among the other aspects of Catholic sexual theology generally discounted by the laity and many priests. Nonetheless, the hypocrisy of a church condemning homosexuality while depending on a significantly gay priesthood to run it and to administer its sacraments is, among several other factors, directly implicated in the sexual abuse scandal. The unspoken known that the priesthood is more homosexual than the wider culture is countered by an edict to priests not to speak openly about their sexual orientation but rather to preach about the evil of enacted homosexuality. Mixed messages, sexual secrets, and denied realities abound in a clerical Wonderland in which the institutional church appears to play the Queen of Hearts. Secrecy about and cover-up of the sexual abuse of minors becomes an almost inevitable component of such a crazy and crazy-making realm.

Contemporary researchers suggest that between 28 percent and 56 percent of the American priesthood is homosexual. Most psychologically healthy gay men are attracted to the priesthood for the same reasons that it attracts mature heterosexual men. They love God, desire to pursue a life of deepened spirituality, and are committed to living out gospel values within a community of faith. It is probable that gay men always have been attracted to the priesthood in numbers disproportionate to their presence in the wider society. Until very recently, and in some cases still, Catholic boys who recognized their homosexuality faced the scorn of family, friends, and church. Taught that acting on his sexual love and strivings is intrinsically evil and mortally sinful, the Catholic gay man faces painful conflicts between his identity and his attachment relationships. Entering the priesthood was a move that, until quite recently, evoked family pride, with the seminarian or priest being held in great esteem by his community.

It is also logical to hypothesize that homosexual men would be attracted to the all-male environment of the priesthood. Further, when boys entered the seminary as young teens, the explosion of pubescent sexual strivings had only one direction in which to travel. Surrounded by men and boys in an environment that rendered women dangerous, except for idealized mothers and the Virgin Mary, an adolescent seminarian was left with few choices. He pretty much could lust after his mother or he could lust after those around him, many of them gay men. And so we encounter the paradox of an organization teaching that homosexuality is disordered and then constructing an environment that maximally elicits homosexual yearnings.

Many gay men growing up in what has been until recently a pervasively homophobic society have lived in closets in which they sometimes deny who they are even to themselves. The anti-homosexual theology of the Catholic Church, conveyed in homosocial seminary environments likely to stimulate forbidden and derided sexual desires, often constructed for the young gay priest a particularly suffocating closet. Here, the self-hatred plaguing many gay men could be magnified for gay priests, some of whom tried to cope by strenuously denying their sexual orientation, even turning hatred outward toward other gay men. Denial and dissociation on this scale encourages the denial of other sexual secrets like the sexual abuse of children.

Nothing psychologically sound or, I suspect, spiritually enriching can emanate from such hypocrisy. Surely, the pope, cardinal, bishop, or priest who cannot look in the mirror and acknowledge his reflection as a homosexual man will have difficulty looking into the face of a sexually abusive brother and naming what he sees. Rather, he is likely to close his eyes to true evil, because his own humanity has been mislabeled as inclining toward evil. He may also blame or ignore the victims of sex abuse, unconsciously turning away from his own victimization by his Church and the wider society. Closets, then, are built within closets and lies pile up until it is hard to find the truth, much less speak the truth.

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