



Understanding Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gay Priests Are Not the Problem

By Michael R. Stevenson, Ph.D.

According to news reports, at least 225 Catholic priests, including four bishops, quit or were suspended between January and June 2002 due to allegations of sexual misconduct, primarily with adolescent boys. During the 1990's, the Catholic Church in the United States spent well over a half billion dollars in jury awards, settlements, legal fees, and assessment and therapeutic expenses responding to claims of sexual abuse by priests.² In spite of this history, few have attempted to fully understand the problem. Instead, church officials, misinformed in their understanding of the present crisis, were quick to point an accusing finger at gay priests rather than focusing on more glaring problems with church officials' response to reports of abuse. In fact, news coverage of the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has done more to link gay men with the abuse of children than any story in decades.³

In addition to blaming gay priests for the scandal, some high-ranking church officials and media personalities have advocated banning gay men from the priesthood, even if they remain celibate.⁴ Blaming gay priests for this scandal will harm all priests, regardless of their sexual orientations.

Given the lay public's inability to distinguish gay priests from other priests, all priests will be treated with growing suspicion.⁵

More importantly, unless church officials develop a more informed understanding of the roots of the sexual abuse problem, they will be unable to formulate and implement an effective intervention. As Father Robert Nugent suggests, "Everyone

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agrees that a preventive approach is as important as responding to the damage that has already occurred."⁶ Far from resolving the problem, blaming gay priests for this crisis distracts the church from developing an effective response that would prevent further abuse and ensure the welfare of children and youth.

Policymakers and child welfare advocates must, therefore, look beyond the current crisis and clarify the underlying issues. As this report demonstrates, decades of research show that pedophilia is a mental illness unrelated to sexual orientation. Gay men, including those who become priests, are no threat to the well-being of children.

Evidence of Confusion

There is considerable confusion and disagreement on how best to describe priests who sexually abuse boys. They have been labeled as pedophiles, epebophiles, and pederasts, as sexually immature, whether gay or straight, and as gay men who made bad sexual choices.⁷

- Cardinal Adam Maida of Detroit described the scandal as “not truly a pedophilia-type problem but a homosexual-type problem.”⁸
- According to George Weigel, the Pope’s American biographer, the problem is one of “homosexual clergy not living their celibate promises.”⁹
- Daniel Helminiak, a psychologist and former priest, claims that because repressed homosexual priests are “Psychosexually immature, and deliberately kept that way, they will find their most congenial sex partners in others who are equally immature: male adolescents.”¹⁰
- During the papal summit, the meeting called by the Pope to discuss this crisis, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago indicated that “A definite connection was made between homosexuality and sexual misconduct with minors if the conduct is with minor men... It was taken for granted if you have got an adult man having relations with an adolescent boy you have got homosexuality.”¹¹

As the Cardinal implies, such misbehavior has meaning. The problem is that the participants, as well as society, can interpret the behavior in a variety of ways. In short, knowing that a priest instigated a sexual interaction with a boy (of any age) tells us very little about his sexual orientation. Whether due to immaturity, bad choices, or some diagnosable mental illness, without further information, such behavior only tells us that he has broken the law and that he has violated his promise of celibacy and vow of chastity.¹²

Clarifying Psychiatric Diagnoses and Terms

The term “pedophile” is often used generically to refer to any adult who sexually abuses minors, regardless of their ages. However, among mental health professionals,

pedophilia is a mental illness in which an adult is sexually attracted to prepubescent children.¹³ The psychiatric profession believes that pedophilic men are typically attracted to children of a particular age range.

Furthermore, research suggests that regardless of their claimed preferences, their attraction is to the child’s immature body type or lack of secondary sex characteristics rather than the child’s gender.¹⁴ Based on a review of the scientific literature (discussed further below), Dr. Nicolas Groth concluded two decades ago, “The adult male who sexually molests young boys is not likely to be homosexual.”¹⁵ More recent studies re-confirm this conclusion.¹⁶ As Dr. Nathaniel McConaghy, an internationally known expert, has noted, “The man who offends against prepubertal or immediately postpubertal boys is typically not sexually interested in older men or in women.”¹⁷

According to media reports, many of those abused by priests were older youth rather than prepubescent children. In these cases, the abusers would not meet the technical

definition of pedophilia. Some mental health professionals use the term “epebophile” to describe adults who are attracted to adolescent youth who are not yet adults. Unlike

pedophilia, epebophilia is not an official diagnostic category.¹⁸ However, such a condition can be diagnosed and treated by psychologists under the label “paraphilia not otherwise specified.”¹⁹

Labeling offending priests as pedophiles or epebophiles might be useful in clinical contexts as an aid to understanding past behavior and to planning treatment. Diagnostic labels are not helpful in *solving* the current problem, however. If church leaders want to end inappropriate or illegal sexual behavior perpetrated by clergy (whether it be with children or other adults), the church leaders need to foster healthy sexual development among seminarians and priests, regardless of their sexual orientations. This position should not be taken as an indictment of celibacy, but rather a call for widespread implementation of a more sophisticated understanding of sexuality and programs that help seminarians develop a healthy sexual identity.²⁰ As Father Nugent suggests, “Neither chastity nor celibacy means not being a sexual person.”²¹

Distinguishing Sexual Orientation from Pedophilia

Distinguishing between sexual behavior and sexual orientation may help to correct the erroneous perception that child sexual abuse is linked to homosexuality. Sexual orientation refers to feelings of emotional, romantic, and affectional attraction and sexual interest, not simply sexual behavior. Uninformed scientists as well as non-scientists often confuse sexual behavior with sexual orientation.²² In the past, some researchers have routinely assumed that individuals who engage in same-sex sexual behavior were, by definition, *homosexual* regardless of the age of the participants or the number of times such behavior occurred. This is certainly true of news coverage of the priest scandal. However, equating behavior with orientation is scientifically inappropriate and seriously underestimates the complexities of what it means to be gay.

Evidence from the news media suggests that the priests at the center of the controversy have had difficulty developing a clear sense of sexual identity while honoring their vows to abstain from sexual behavior. Empirical research clearly documents the fact that individuals may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behavior, and their sexual behavior may or may not reflect their sexual desires.²³ In a 1992 survey of sexual behavior among US Americans, researchers interviewed 3,432 people who were carefully selected to represent the U.S. adult population.²⁴ Over 9% of the men in this study reported engaging in a same-sex sexual behavior at least once since puberty while only 2.8% reported that they think of themselves as gay. In other

words, some men do not claim a gay identity in spite of the fact that they have engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors. Clearly, having a same-sex sexual partner is not the best indicator of sexual orientation.

Contrary to assumptions made at the papal summit, engaging in same-sex behavior is not synonymous with being gay. Failing to distinguish between behavior and orientation will likely lead to misunderstanding the priests' abusive behavior and will also hinder efforts to prevent further abuses.

Perpetrators of Abuse

Over time, Church leaders have been confronted repeatedly by the sexual misconduct of priests.²⁵ In spite of claims that 80% of the priests who abuse minors target adolescent boys,²⁶ no one knows how many girls may also have been molested.²⁷

Contrary to the warnings of anti-gay crusaders, researchers have demonstrated repeatedly that a gay man is no more likely than a heterosexual man to perpetrate sexual activity with a child.²⁸ For example, a 1994 study found that "a child's risk of being molested by his or her relative's heterosexual partner is 100 times greater than by someone who might be identified as homosexual."²⁹ In 2001, British researchers found that heterosexual men in their study were far more likely to be perpetrators of abuse than gay men.³⁰

Similarly, results of a recent study of priests showed that failures in celibacy (whether with children or other adults) occurred in 28% of straight and 24% of gay priests.³¹

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Myths Debunked

The myth that gay men are a threat to young boys was debunked scientifically in the late 1950's, and the association between homosexuality and pedophilia began to fade in the law during the 1960's.⁴⁰ Similarly, by the 1970's, a large body of research had accumulated showing that homosexuality was neither psychopathological nor associated with mental illness.⁴¹ Based on this research, homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the American Psychological Association resolved that "homosexuality per se implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability, or general social or vocational capabilities."⁴² Since the mid 1970's, other major national mental health organizations have adopted similar position statements.⁴³

Clearly, gay priests are no more likely than straight priests to violate their celibacy.

Based on his review of the available literature, Dr. Thomas Plante estimated that 2% to 6% of Catholic priests have been sexually involved with minors.³² In *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, Rev. Donald B. Cozzens cites studies suggesting that as many as half of Catholic priests and seminarians are gay. Others have suggested even higher figures.³³ If approximately half of priests are gay and half are straight, but only 2 to 6% of priests have been sexually involved with minors of either sex, then the vast majority of priests, regardless of their sexual orientations, are neither pedophiles nor ephebophiles.

Policy Implications for the Church and Other Institutions

As both the mental health diagnostic categories and decades of research show, gay priests are not the source of the child sexual abuse problem. The bottom line is that when sexual behavior occurs between an adult and a child of the same sex, we know nothing about the sexual orientation of either party. Therefore, policies intended to prevent the full participation of gay men in social institutions, like banning gay men from the priesthood or from other occupations involving work with children, will not prevent unwelcome sexual advances.

Blaming gay priests for the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is not only unfounded, it will help no one. Protecting potential victims, regardless of their age or gen-

der, requires policies that reflect a sophisticated understanding of sexual orientation, sexual identity, and celibacy. Only when such policies are implemented will all priests and seminarians be encouraged to develop a healthy sexual identity, celibate or not, regardless of their sexual orientations.

Although many seminaries encourage students to face conflicts and tensions concerning sexuality,³⁴ critics claim that no seminary teaches celibacy or sexuality adequately.³⁵ As Father Nugent suggests, "What is also needed is an appreciation of human sexuality in all its multiple dimensions, so that a student experiences his sexuality as a positive gift rather than as a dangerous power to be feared, denied, suppressed, or controlled rather than channeled."³⁶

Policymakers outside the Church have rightly defined any sexual activity with a child as a punishable offense, regardless of a perpetrator's sexual orientation or psychiatric diagnosis. Legal codes in the U.S. make it illegal for an adult to engage in sexual behavior with a child or youth who has not yet reached the legal age of consent, even though the age of consent varies from one state to another. In other words, according to the law, whether perpetrators choose targets based on age or level of maturation is of little significance as long as the victim is "under age."³⁷ Furthermore, the sexual orientation of both parties is irrelevant given the illegality of the behaviors in question.

Social science research on prejudice shows that members of stigmatized groups tend to be accused of the same kinds of misconduct, including rape, child abuse, and the inability to control sexual impulses.³⁸ Concerns about gay

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Public Opinion Agrees with Research

Data gathered in 1999 by Dr. Gregory Herek show that the general public no longer subscribes to the myth that gay men are likely to commit child sexual abuse. Only 19% of men in Herek's national survey of 1,335 heterosexual adults believed that most gay men are likely to molest children. An even smaller number, 8.5%, expressed this belief about lesbians. Furthermore, far fewer women regarded gay people as child molesters, as only 6.5% held this view about lesbians and 9.6% believed it to be true of gay men.⁴⁴ As this report documents, the existing body of psychological research supports the general public's belief that gay men pose no threat to children.

men in general and gay priests, in particular, should be viewed in light of the fact that members of other minority groups, including African-Americans, Jews, Gypsies, and people with developmental disabilities, historically have been accused of posing a threat to the health and well-being of women and children.³⁹

Blaming gay men for the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is yet another example of scapegoating that has no foundation in decades of psychological research. Scapegoating can only lead to misguided public and private policies that will further distract us from developing an effective response to a serious problem. ■

About the Author

Michael R. Stevenson, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at Ball State University where he serves as the Director of the Diversity Policy Institute. As a Senior Congressional Fellow (1995-1996), he served as science advisor to Senator Paul Simon (D-IL). In 2000, the American Psychological Association recognized him for outstanding and unusual contributions to the science and

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NOTES

- 1 Grossman, C. L. (2002, June 12). *Bishops resign: scandal widens*. USA Today, p.1.
- 2 Cozzens, D. B. (2000). *The changing face of the priesthood*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- 3 Fox, K. (2002, May 3). Gays resist link to abuse scandal. *Washington Blade*, p. 38.
- 4 Smith, R. (2002, May 3). Catholic reform groups blast gay scapegoating: Coalition to issue statement saying gay priests aren't to blame for current crisis. *Washington Blade*, p. 12; Monsignor: U.S. immorality and gays to blame for abuse, (2002, April 23). *Daily Herald*. Vatican studies ways to weed out gay priests. (2002, March 29). *Washington Blade*, p. 64; Grossman, C. L. (2002, April 25). Hot under the collar: Gay Catholics angry, say they've been singled out. *USA Today*, 9D; Fox, K. (2002, May 3). Gays resist link to abuse scandal. *Washington Blade*, p. 38. See also, Statement of the Catholic Medical Association "Homosexuality and Hope," <http://www.cathmed.org/>
- 5 See Cozzens, note 2.
- 6 Nugent, R. (1998, January/March). Catholic Priests and sexual misconduct. *Vocations and Prayer*, 4-9, p. 8.
- 7 Douglas-Brown, L. (2002, April 5). Ephebophilia: It's not pedophilia and it's not homosexuality, but it's wreaking havoc in the Catholic priesthood and raising issues for the gay rights movement. *Washington Blade*, pp. 1, 23-24; Sorensen, I. (2002, April 26). Anti-gay homily leads to rare Catholic reversal: Archdiocese retracts monsignor's attempt to blame scandal on 'disorder' of homosexuality. *Washington Blade*, p. 24.
- 8 Smith, R. (2002, April 26). Homosexual atmosphere blamed by Catholic leaders: US Cardinals meet with pope on sex abuse scandal, but blame heaped on gay priests. *Washington Blade*, pp. 1, 24.
- 9 Henneberger, M & Sterngold, J. (2002, April 19). Vatican meeting on abuse issue is set to confront thorny topics. *New York Times*.
- 10 Helminiak, D. (2002, March 29). Repressed gay priests at the heart of scandal. *Washington Blade*, p. 32
- 11 Liebllich, J. (2002, April 24). 'An appalling sin.' pope says: Vatican session with cardinals on sex abuse also opens debate on homosexuality in priesthood, *Chicago Tribune*, p. 1.
- 12 See Nugent, note 6.
- 13 American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.-Text Revision). Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- 14 Freund, K. (1965). Erotic preference in pedophilia. *Behavioral Research and Theory*, 3, 229-234, Freund, K. & Kuban, M. (1993). Deficient erotic gender differentiation in pedophilia: A follow-up. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 22(6), 619-628.; Howell, K. (1979). Some meaning of children for pedophiles (pp. 519-526). In M. Cook and G. Wilson (Eds.), *Love and Attraction*, New York: Pergamon.; see also Ames, M. A., & Houston, D. A. (1990). Legal, social, and biological definitions of pedophilia. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 19(4), 333-342.

- 15 Groth, A. N., & Gary, T. S. (1982). Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and pedophilia: Sexual offenses against children and adult sexual orientation. In A.M. Scacco (Ed.), *Male rape: A casebook of sexual aggression* (pp. 143-152). New York: AMS Press.
- 16 Jenny, C., Roesler, T. A., & Poyer, K. L. (1994). Are children at risk for sexual abuse by homosexuals? *Pediatrics*, 94(1), 41-44.
- 17 McConaghy, N. (1998). Pedophilia: A review of the evidence. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 32(2) 252-265.
- 18 That is, it does not appear in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, published by the American Psychiatric Association, the document used by mental health professionals to label and describe symptoms of pathology.
- 19 See American Psychiatric Association, note 13.
- 20 Nugent, R. (2000, January-February). Helping seminarians live celibate chastity. *Review for Religious*, 66-79.
- 21 See Nugent, note 20.
- 22 For an example of those uninformed, see Blanchard, R. & Dickey, R. (1998). Pubertal age in homosexual and heterosexual sexual offenders against children, pubescents, and adults. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 10(4), 273-282. For an example of confused non-scientists, see Reisman, J. A. (1999, March 26). *The APAs: Academic Pedophile Advocates*. Retrieved from: http://www.worldnetdaily.com/bluesky_excomm/19990326_xex_the_apas_aca.shtml. For a more detailed analysis and discussion of the material in this paragraph, see Stevenson, M.R. (2000). Public policy, homosexuality, and the sexual coercion of children. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, 12(4), 1-19.
- 23 Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality: Sexual practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 24 Laumann, et al.
- 25 See Cozzens, note 2.
- 26 Plante, T. (1999). *Bless me Father for I have sinned: Perspectives on sexual abuse committed by Roman Catholic priests*. Westport, CN: Greenwood.
- 27 Ripley, A. (2002, May 20). Inside The Church's Closet: Gay priests talk about their hidden lives, love of the church and fear of being scapegoated in the sex scandals. *Time*.
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²⁹ Jenny, C. Roesler, T. A., & Poyer, K. L. (1994). Are children at risk for sexual abuse by homosexuals? *Pediatrics*, 41(1), 41-44.

³⁰ Glasser, M., Kolvin, I., Campbell, D., Glasser, A., Leitch, I. & Farrelly, S. (2001). Cycle of child sexual abuse: Links between being a victim and becoming a perpetrator. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 179, 482-494. It may be useful to note that empirical research on this issue is rare primarily because scholars already accept that there is no connection between adult sexual orientation and child molestation so they devote their research efforts to unsettled questions.

³¹ Based on results of a study conducted by G. J. McGlone at the California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant University. As reported in Nugent, R. (2002, April/June). Healthy celibate priests. *Vocations and Prayer*, 4-7.

³² See Plante, note 26. See also Daw, J. (2002, June). Can psychology help a church in crises? *Monitor on Psychology*, 24-26; Sipe, A. W. R. (1990). *A secret world: Sexuality and the search for celibacy*. New York: Brunner Mazel; Sipe, A. W. R. (1995). *Sex, priests, and power: Anatomy of a crisis*. New York: Brunner Mazel.

³³ Helminiak, D. (2002, March 29). Repressed gay priests at the heart of scandal. *Washington Blade*, 32. Helminiak claims between 30 and 60% of priests are gay.

³⁴ Nugent, R. (2002, April/June). Healthy celibate priests. *Vocations and Prayer*, 4-7.

³⁵ See Plante, note 26; Sipe, *Sex, priests, and power: Anatomy of a crisis*, note 33.

³⁶ Nugent, R. (2000, January-February). Helping seminarians live celibate chastity. *Review for Religious*, 66-79. p.72.

³⁷ Some research in this area also fails to distinguish incest from other forms of potentially harmful childhood sexual experience. Although the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim is undoubtedly relevant to the child's subsequent well-being, this relationship is less salient in the policy arena.

³⁸ Martin, A. D. (1982). The minority question. *et cetera*. 39(1), 22-42; Martin, A. D. (1988). The stigmatization of the gay or lesbian adolescent. In M. Schneider (Ed.), *Often invisible: Counseling gay and lesbian youth* (pp. 59-69). Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services;

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³⁹ Herek, G. M. (1991). Stigma, prejudice, and violence against lesbians and gay men. In J. C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 60-80). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

⁴⁰ Pratt, J. (1998). The rise and fall of homophobia and sexual psychopath legislation in postwar society. *Psychology, public policy, and law*, 4(1/2), 25-49; Wolfenden, J. (1957). *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*. London: Command 247.

⁴¹ Gonsiorek, J.C. (1991). The empirical basis for the demise of the illness model of homosexuality. In J.C. Gonsiorek, & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 115-136). Newbury Park, CA: Sage; Herek, G. M. (1991). Myths about sexual orientation: A lawyer's guide to social science research. *Law & Sexuality: A Review of Lesbian and Gay Legal Issues*, 1, 133-172.

⁴² Conger, J. (1975). Proceeding of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1984: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist*, 40, 621-653.

⁴³ The American Psychiatric Association, the American Counseling Association, and National Association of Social Workers, the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics have such policy statements. For further discussion of these issues see Morris, J.F. & Hart, S. (2003) Defending claims about mental health. In M.R. Stevenson & J. Cogan (Eds). *Advocating Equality for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Americans*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁴ Herek, G. (2002). Gender gaps in public opinion about lesbians and gay men. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 66(1), 40-66.

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