

[John Jay Report: On Not Blaming Homosexual Priests](#)

Posted at: Tuesday, May 17, 2011 10:51:43 PM

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The new [John Jay Report](#) on the “causes and contexts” of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church includes a finding that will probably surprise many observers. As David Gibson states in a piece on [Religion News Service](#):

[T]he researchers found no statistical evidence that gay priests were more likely than straight priests to abuse minors—a finding that undermines a favorite talking point of many conservative Catholics. The disproportionate number of adolescent male victims was about opportunity, not preference or pathology, the report states.

What’s more, researchers note that the rise in the number of gay priests from the late 1970s onward actually corresponded with “a decreased incidence of abuse—not an increased incidence of abuse.”

How is this possible, particularly given the widespread stereotype of the abusive or predatory homosexual priest? How else to explain so many male victims of abuse?

First of all, nearly every reputable psychologist and psychiatrist, not to mention almost every scholarly study, decisively rejects the conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, as well as any cause-and-effect relationship. [The studies are almost too numerous to mention](#). Pedophilia, say experts, is often more a question of a stunted (or arrested) sexuality, more a question of power, and more a question of proximity (among other complicated psychological and social factors). The new John Jay College of Criminal Justice study, called “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010,” points to, among other reasons: emotionally immature and psychologically maladjusted men entering seminaries; the difficulty of dealing with cultural upheaval in which priests found themselves in the 1960s and 1970s; as well as, again, the issue of proximity--young men and boys were abused because

priests were more likely to be working with them, rather than with young women and girls. But simply put, being a homosexual priest does not make one an abusive priest.

Indeed, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops commissioned another extensive independent study in the wake of the American abuse crisis in 2002, also undertaken by John Jay College. In 2009, Margaret Smith, a researcher from John Jay, [reported to the bishops](#), "What we are suggesting is that the idea of sexual identity be separated from the problem of sexual abuse. At this point, we do not find a connection between homosexual identity and the increased likelihood of subsequent abuse from the data that we have right now."

Second, there is a stronger argument against the frequent conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia: the lived experience of emotionally mature and psychologically healthy gay men (and women) who have never, ever abused a child; are not tempted to do so; are not attracted to children at all; and would, in short, never think of doing so. Being gay does not make one a pedophile.

This insight is, I believe, known by thoughtful bishops, experienced church leaders and seasoned Vatican officials. That is one reason why last year the Rev. Marcus Stock, the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, released a statement saying, "To the best of my knowledge, there is no empirical data which concludes that sexual orientation is connected to child sexual abuse. The consensus among researchers is that the sexual abuse of children is not a question of sexual 'orientation', whether heterosexual or homosexual, but of a disordered attraction or 'fixation.'"

But despite the findings of the new John Jay report, and the warnings of psychology professionals against equating pedophilia and abuse, some both inside and outside the church may still find this new study difficult to accept. If these findings were true, they may ask, why would so many victims be not just young boys but adolescent males? Once again, researchers have always suggested that this has more to do a welter of reasons, including proximity: many priests were in the past responsible for the care of boys. In schools and parish settings, Catholic sisters cared for girls; priests for boys.

Certainly there were homosexually-oriented priests who were abusers, just as there were heterosexually-oriented abusers. (That much should be clear to anyone who has followed this terrible saga since 2002.) But, as the new study shows, the vast majority of homosexual priests (and heterosexual priests) never abused anyone. In fact, the increased numbers of homosexual priests coincided with a *decrease* in abuse cases. So where does the stereotype of the abusive homosexual priest come from? Here is where the situation grows more complex.

One of the main reasons that many persist in thinking that homosexuality is the root cause of the abuse crisis, and that homosexual priests are mainly pedophiles, is because there are almost no "public" models of healthy, mature, loving celibate homosexual priests to rebut that stereotype. An [America magazine article](#) published in 2000 looked at some of the reasons why.

There are in the Catholic priesthood, and there have always been, celibate homosexual priests and chaste homosexual members of religious orders. How do I know this? Because, like most

priests, I have known not a few of them. They are emotionally mature, psychologically healthy, genuinely loving, and beloved by those with whom they minister; they work hard on behalf of the "People of God," and they have never abused a single child. Many of these men are among the holiest people I've ever known. I consider a few of them saints. And let me repeat, so as to be clear: they are *celibate*. Or, in religious orders, they are *chaste*. (As an aside, using the word "gay priest" sets off alarm bells in some corners of the church, where "gay" is assumed to mean sexually active.)

Some of these men are public about their orientations only with close friends, their confessors or their spiritual directors. The reasons for non-disclosure are easy to identify, even if they are not always easy for the general public to understand.

First, these priests may be fearful of how their parishioners would react, especially if they are living in a parish where homophobia abounds. Second, they might feel, not without reason, that a public declaration might place more emphasis on the priest than on his ministry and, likewise, serve as a distraction and even cause a serious division within the parish. Third, they might be fearful of reprisals or punishments by some less-than-understanding bishops or religious superiors. Fourth, they may be unable or unwilling to do so for a variety of personal reasons. (For example, they may be of a generation where talk of sexuality simply wasn't done, or they may still be deeply embarrassed by their orientation, despite their celibacy and chastity.) And, in the wake of the abuse crisis, when some commentators linked homosexuality with pedophilia, some of their fears intensified. Finally, some priests may be explicitly forbidden by their bishops or religious superiors, fearful of publicity, from speaking about their orientation publicly.

Some of this came to a boil with the release of the Vatican's 2004 letter, completed after a lengthy Vatican "visitation" of the U.S. seminaries in the wake of the abuse crisis. The document, "[Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders](#)," stated that men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" could not be admitted to the priesthood.

Since then the document has been interpreted in various ways in diocesan seminaries and in formation programs in religious orders, at least according to officials with whom I've spoken in the intervening years. Last year a diocesan seminarian wrote to tell me that in his seminary there was a "don't tell your brothers" policy, while in other seminaries any admission of one's homosexuality can lead, as I am told, to expulsion. On the other hand, some bishops and superiors of religious orders, recognizing the historical contributions of celibate gay priests, have interpreted the document to mean that "deep-seated" means that one cannot live celibately; ergo, if a gay man feels an authentic call to the priesthood, is emotionally mature and can live a celibate lifestyle, he can be ordained. One of the most pastoral approaches comes from Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, who wisely said on the document's release that a man who is homosexual and feels a vocation to be a priest "[shouldn't be discouraged](#)." Other bishops and religious superiors--it is admittedly difficult to say how many--have adopted similar approaches.

Still, the fear among many celibate homosexual clergy remains. Not long ago an experienced priest with many years in parish ministry told me that the only way that things will change is

when all the homosexual priests decide one Sunday to "come out" to their parishes. But that is highly unlikely: besides the reasons stated above, the bonds that tie these men together are usually local, and mostly informal. Nonetheless, something of that nature could serve as a significant "teaching moment" for the entire church. On the other hand, many Catholic parishioners aren't ignorant of this fact: they are most likely aware that some of their priests are homosexual, and as long as they're celibate and loving and generous and prayerful, parishioners are accepting of them, and are usually grateful. The inspiring story of the [Rev. Fred Daley](#), of Utica, New York, is one such example.

Most Catholics--including most bishops and archbishops--already know these things. The new John Jay Report will only confirm their accepting approach to the celibate homosexual clergy with whom they have worked over the years. They know that homosexuality and pedophilia are not the same thing. (This may be why Pope Benedict XVI himself, en route to the United States for his visit in 2008, [responded this way](#) to a question about the abuse crisis: "I do not wish to talk about homosexuality, but about pedophilia, which is a different thing.") They also know that there are many of celibate homosexual men in the priesthood and chaste men in religious orders who have never abused anyone and who, moreover, lead generous, dedicated, and even holy lives.

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