

Challenges for a church under fire

Gays have been vital to priesthood

By PATRICK GILES
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I AM BOTH a Catholic and a victim of sexual abuse. So each day's news of lawsuits, cover-ups and sexual accusations against priests is like a slap. How could this have happened in my church? And once it did, how could so many of our leaders respond to reports of abuse by trying to bury them?

The truth is, the hierarchy ruling the Catholic Church frequently conceals its inner workings, even (perhaps especially) from its members. So it's no real surprise that one of its first reactions when hit with this latest wave of scandal was to fall back on a tried-and-true technique. Influential church fundamentalists like William Donohue of The Catholic League are correct when they point to homosexuality as the unspoken issue of this miserable affair but wrong in their conclusion that homosexuality itself is the problem.

Aside from their disgraceful persistence in equating gayness with pedophilia (a number of the molestation cases involve priests attacking girls), these Catholics avoid the truth our religion has denied for centuries: Without gays, there is no priesthood.

From the beginning, the church has attracted its priests as much through bigotry as through faith. For over a millennium, gay Catholics had almost no choice but to become priests. Out in the world, their sexuality placed them at an unbearable risk of imprisonment, torture and death — not to mention pariah status within their own families. But within the walls of a rectory or monastery, they could live in penance for being who they were, while at the same time contributing to the propagation of the faith that misunderstood and abused them.

Gays have kept this pact with the church ever since, and their sacrifice and dedication have kept the institution up and running. But this responsibility has carried with it a heavy burden of denial and silence that has contributed to today's unprecedented crisis.

Mine was the first generation of gay Catholics given a new choice for living our lives. Prior to our time, the religious gay son in a Catholic family had limited options upon reaching adulthood. He could hide his true identity by marrying a woman, as many did (and still do); he could stay home and care for his parents for the rest of their lives; or he could answer a religious calling, and either deny the gay part of himself or exercise it within the disguising embrace of the church.

(When I became an adult and moved out to attend college, my godmother was surprised. "I always thought you were the one who'd be going into the priesthood," she blurted out one day. It took me some time to realize her assumption was not based on any show of religious fervor on my part.)

I didn't go into the priesthood because the world has changed even if the church hasn't. We don't all need to hide behind cassocks anymore. Gay Catholic laity are eager to be fully accepted, to marry and raise families in the church. Today's gay priests are increasingly open about themselves and are frequently tolerated, even supported, by their parishioners (if not their superiors).

Father Mychal Judge, for example, the New York City Fire Department chaplain who perished along with so many of his men on Sept. 11, walked a fine line of being "neither out nor closeted," as one of his friends told the national gay magazine *The Advocate*. But his sexuality was never acknowledged publicly by the church. Is it any wonder, given its history of seeing gay priests as a great scandal, that the church's response to this true disgrace was to cover up the incidents and leave the pain of their victims unaddressed?

A new generation of religious historians is uncovering evidence that Catholicism in its early years was not so hysterically obsessed with eradicating homosexuality and did not always brand gays with the mark of the devil. The studies of John Boswell (author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*) and others suggest gay people not only existed in the early church, some of them flourished,

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especially in the religious orders.

But in recent years, gay Catholics eager for dialogue about their rightful place have been answered with a wall of hostility as solid and immovable as the wall of sexual silence used to be. Many gays who served this church as priests and nuns have been harassed or ejected or left in disillusion. Faced with dwindling numbers due to their own intolerance, bishops and cardinals began holding on to the few priests they had left — even, it turns out, if they were child abusers.

The perfectly pitched, carefully calibrated letter of "explanation" New York's Cardinal Edward M. Egan handed out at parishes a few weeks ago would have done an Enron spin doctor proud, but it also demonstrated that he and other implicated leaders cannot be trusted to resolve this crisis. (It was Egan, after all, who as a Connecticut bishop once stated in a deposition that the diocese should not be held liable for its molesting clergy because priests were "independent contractors.")

It still hasn't sunk in with some

leaders that quality spin won't resolve anything. "If I had known about this, I would never have sent my kids to Catholic schools," a mother of several grown Catholics told me in the vestibule of St. Patrick's during Holy Week. She then raised her voice to reiterate: "Never." Such Catholics — and no one should mistake them for a minority — don't want feel-good messages. They want truthful explanations, sincere penance and reforms.

Our best hope for emerging from this scandal as a stronger community lies in supporting those rank-and-file priests and nuns who have served us so nobly. I have been hearing plenty of indignation and frustration from members of the clergy. (One fine and dedicated priest I know told me about a colleague who noticed a young mother on the street the other day pulling her son tightly to her side when she noticed the priest walking in their direction.) With our backing, clergy must demand improvements from an increasingly authoritarian and self-interested Catholic Church that helped create the current "don't ask, don't tell" climate.

Our current Catholic leaders would seemingly rather face screaming

headlines and class-action lawsuits than listen and learn from their own clerics and worshippers. But they have no real choice anymore, unless they cling to the belief that the horror, anger and sense of betrayal felt by their faithful will all just die down.

They must listen, and they must change. And it's ridiculous to insist, as some Catholic conservatives have, that the church's teachings and actions are cast in stone. Answering the needs of changing times, the church no longer celebrates mass in Latin. It no longer tortures and burns heretics. The church is not, after all, just its leaders: It is also its worshippers, and, if they apply enough pressure, change is inevitable.

For the sake of our children, we must demand to stop being treated like children. And we must not accept the easy reassurances that the very people behind these tragedies of hypocrisy can be trusted to lead us in a better direction. After all, we've seen what happens to good little Catholics trained to confuse sanctity with silence.

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