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Experts on sex offenders have news for Vatican

Abusers' behavior does not stem from orientation, studies show

By MARY GAIL FRAWLEY-O'DEA

Both the John Jay College of Criminal Justice report on the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the 2005 Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People stated that Roman Catholic priests abused mostly males. The John Jay study, for example, found that 64 percent of the accused priests abused only males; 22.6 percent abused only females; 3.6 percent abused both girls and boys, and in 10 percent of the cases, the gender was unknown. Statistics were similar in the 2005 study.

Not only were most reported victims male, they also were pubescent; 60 percent were first abused between the ages of 10-14. These are not, however, biologically or psychosexually fully developed males and cannot be construed as homosexual partners for any adult.

Still, the gender and age of so many victims created space for Vatican officials such as Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez and Fr. Andrew Baker, conservative journalist Deal Hudson and others to link the sexual abuse of young people to homosexual priests. Now it appears that the Vatican, holding back on a full ban on gays in the priesthood, wants to hold homosexual priests responsible for the sexual abuse crisis.

The attack on gays by some Catholic spokesmen has drawn criticism from experts on sex offenders. Robert Geffner, psychologist and editor of the *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, stated that research indicates that homosexuals are no more likely than heterosexuals to violate minors sexually. David Finkelhor, director of Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, views sexual attraction to minors as a separate sexual attraction, an opinion also espoused by John Bancroft, physician and director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Sexual offender researchers Nicholas Groth and Frank Oliveri studied more than 3,000 sex offenders and did not find even one homosexual man who shifted from an attraction to adult men to a desire for minors. Conversely, they found that men who were nonexclusively fixated on children, or who regressed from an attraction to adults to an interest in children, all described themselves as heterosexual and, in addition, usually were homophobic. Similarly, Minneapolis psychologist Peter Dimock concluded that most minor boys are abused by heterosexual men, some of whom are indifferent to the gender of their victims, choosing either girls or boys based on the minor's availability and vulnerability. Perhaps more sexual predators abuse boys than once was thought but are reluctant to say so and be perceived as homosexuals.

Though researchers and clinicians working with sexual offenders maintain that the vast majority of them are heterosexual, we must also consider the possibility that some sexual abusers are homosexual men who deny their orientation, replacing recognition and acceptance with homophobia. Other priest abusers may have never consolidated any sexual orientation, claiming to be heterosexual in the breach of their

confusion, conflict or ignorance. All priests who abuse are criminals, although the potential for rehabilitation may differ among types of offenders. The imperative point here is that, for the sexual perpetrators in any one of these groups, their criminal behaviors stem not from their sexual orientation but rather reflect their psychological immaturity, arrested development, or antisocial, criminal proclivities, a fact relentlessly presented to the Vatican and just as relentlessly ignored.

While sexual orientation does not effectively explain the selection of male victims by Catholic priests, there are indeed other plausible reasons. To a large extent, victim gender selection by priests reflected opportunity. Consider, for example, prison sex, in which heterosexual males with more power and authority within the inmate population select and rape other, less powerful men to achieve sexual release and to impose their power on another person. Boys were much more available to priests than were girls. Parents were thrilled to have a priest single their boy out for attention and encouraged their sons to spend time with Father, even allowing them to travel with the priest. Even years ago, parents would not have felt as comfortable having their girls spend too much time with the priest and he, in turn, would have known it would look suspicious to have girls tagging after him. Further, many priests were frightened of and misogynistic towards girls and women, so would be put off from having sex with them. They might also be wary of impregnating pubescent or postpubescent girls.

For some sexually undeveloped priests, sexual abuse of a pubertal boy may have signified sexual merger with a male perceived to be a psychosexual peer of the abuser. In addition, it may have represented an unconscious act of hostility toward a boy who otherwise could look forward to a sexual life closed off to the priest. In other words, the abuser, who could have entered a minor seminary at age 14 or 15, may have unconsciously attacked his victim's sexuality at the same age he was when he entered the minor seminary, symbolically castrating the victim as he himself was symbolically castrated. Finally, clinicians working with Catholic priests say some priests define celibacy as refraining from sexual relationships with women and thus could convince themselves that sex with minor males did not jeopardize their celibate status.

Vatican officials, in their search to blame the sexual abuse scandal on someone or something external to institutional and doctrinal failings of the church itself, conflated sexual orientation with psychosexual maturation and with criminal behavior. Psychosexually mature, adult homosexual men have consensual sex with other adult men much as psychosexually mature, adult heterosexual men have consensual sex with adult women. Criminal heterosexuals sexually violate adult women and children of both genders; almost surely some criminal homosexuals sexually victimize adult men and some minors. These are crimes of power, ultimately having little to do with sex or the sexual orientation of the criminal. Both in and out of the priesthood, there also may be some psychosexually immature heterosexual and homosexual men who turn to minors of either gender because, in the subjective experience of the offender, the young people are experienced as psychosexual peers.

The Vatican's proposed limitations on gay priests will, of course, have no impact on these groups, other than implicitly directing them to remain psychosexually immature, silent about their sexual orientation, and thus potentially dangerous to adult parishioners and minors. Instead, the Vatican's policy will primarily persecute gay men who have accepted their homosexuality enough to speak about it.

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