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# Gay Priests and Gay Marriage

What the one issue has to do with the other

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**T**HE sex-abuse scandal currently plaguing the Catholic priesthood has already grown to the point where it poses a serious threat to the power, prestige, and credibility of the American Catholic Church. The sky, so to speak, is falling. An institution whose fundamental strength and continuity (whatever its many problems) could once be taken for granted is experiencing a genuine crisis.

Yet, over and above its significance for the Catholic Church, the greatest lesson of this scandal has yet to be drawn. The uproar over priestly sex abuse—especially the calls to do away with both priestly celibacy and the Church's traditional teachings on sexuality—offers spectacular confirmation of nearly every warning ever issued by the opponents of gay marriage. The argument over gay marriage has always turned on the question of whether marriage will reduce gay promiscuity, or whether gays instead will subvert the monogamous ethos of traditional marriage. The priesthood scandal is a stunningly clear case in which the opening of an institution to large numbers of homosexuals, far from strengthening norms of sexual restraint, has instead resulted in the conscious and successful subversion of the norms themselves. Historically and theologically, moreover, priestly celibacy and marital fidelity have always been intimately related. Indeed, there is already good evidence to suggest that today's attack on priestly celibacy heralds tomorrow's assault on the ethos of marital monogamy.

After Vatican II, and in conformity with the broader cultural changes of the Sixties, the U.S. Catholic Church allowed homosexuals to enter the priesthood in increasing numbers. The homosexual orientation itself, it was stressed, was not sinful. So as long as a homosexual adhered to the very same vow of celibacy taken by his heterosexual counterpart, there was no reason to deprive him of a priestly vocation. This was a compassionate stance, and one that promised to incorporate a heretofore stigmatized minority into a venerable institution, thereby strengthening the institution itself.

Yet imagine that an opponent of this new openness to homosexuals in the priesthood had uttered a warning cry. Imagine that someone had said, back in the 1970s, when homosexuals were flooding into Catholic seminaries all over the U.S., that substantial numbers of gay priests, far from accepting the rule of celibacy, would deliberately flout that rule, both in theory and in practice. Suppose that someone had argued that homosexual priests would gain control of many seminaries, that many would openly "date," that many would actively cultivate

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an ethos of gay solidarity and promote a homosexual culture that would drive away heterosexuals—especially theologically orthodox heterosexuals—from the priesthood. Suppose this person went on to argue that, at its extreme, the growing gay subculture of the priesthood would tolerate and protect not only flagrant violations of celibacy, but even the abuse of minors. Then suppose that this person predicted eventual public exposure of the whole sordid mess, an exposure that would precipitate a crisis within the Church itself.

Naturally, anyone prescient—and foolish—enough to say all of these things in the wake of the Sixties would have been excoriated and ostracized as a hysterical gay-hater. It is simply bigoted, he would have been lectured, to claim that large numbers of homosexuals would take the vow of celibacy without making a good-faith effort to adhere to it; and even more so to claim that gay priests would embark on a campaign to deliberately subvert the Church's sexual teachings. And surely our foolish (and hysterically homophobic) friend would have been assured that an institution like the Catholic priesthood would attract only the most conservative homosexuals, not a bunch of "queer" radicals. Besides, even if a very few homosexuals did go so far as to actually abuse the children who had been given into their care, surely the number of such cases could never rise to the point where the stature and credibility of the Church itself would be put into doubt.

#### SUBVERSIVE SUBCULTURE

Yet all of these things have happened. Consider Jason Berry's extraordinary account in *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children* (1992), all the more striking for coming from the pen of a liberal Catholic who would himself like to see a liberalization of the Church's sexual teachings. According to Berry, as the proportion of homosexuals in the priesthood increased dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, many gay priests were visiting the seminary "on the make," frequenting gay bars, and "befriending" high-school students. Berry reports a study of 50 gay Catholic priests, only two of whom said that they were abstaining from sexual activity: "Sixty percent said they felt no guilt about breaking their vows. Ninety percent strongly rejected mandatory celibacy . . . and slightly less than half reported that they engaged in sex in public toilets or parks." According to Berry, Richard Wagner, author of the original study of these gay priests, found that 34 percent of his interviewees called their sexual partners "distinctly younger." (Wagner did not say how young.) What's clear from Berry's account is that sexual abuse of boys by homosexual priests (the typical form of abuse in the current scandal) was part and parcel of a larger gay subculture within the priesthood, a subculture that effectively enabled the abuse of minors by encouraging flagrant homosexuality, and openly flouting the rule of celibacy itself. Indeed, in a now infamous case, a priest who has been the subject of abuse allegations over a period of three decades, the Reverend Paul Shanley, went so far as to advocate abuse in an address to the convention that led to the founding of the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). Here, the connection between sexual abuse and an openly "queer" culture was frighteningly direct.

Of course, it is true that powerful conservative bishops, who were in no way part of a homosexual subculture, played a crit-

ical role in covering up the abuse. They bear responsibility for their actions, yet their cover-up was itself motivated by their knowledge of the size and significance of the problem: To expose any given case was to risk a public unraveling of the larger problem of sexual abuse, disregard of celibacy, and the place of the gay subculture within the Church as a whole.

It is also true that cultural changes abroad in America in the wake of the Sixties eroded the ethic of celibacy among heterosexual priests as well. Yet heterosexual priests disenchanted with celibacy tended to leave the Church. Gay priests who rejected celibacy, on the other hand, tended to remain within the Church and, in word and deed, opposed the requirement of celibacy.

The existence of an influential and intentionally subversive gay subculture within the Catholic priesthood has everything to do with the question of same-sex marriage. To show this, I want to hark back to "The Gay Marriage Debate," an extended exchange I had (on National Review Online and in a number of other venues) in the summer of 2001 with Andrew Sullivan and Jonathan Rauch, the two most prominent conservative advocates of gay marriage. Although both Sullivan and Rauch have honorably and ably defended same-sex marriage as the best way to "domesticate" sexually promiscuous gays, the priesthood scandal is powerful proof that just about every one of their fundamental assumptions is mistaken.

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In our 2001 exchange, Sullivan assumed that only those gay couples prepared to be governed by the traditional ethos of monogamy would marry. I challenged that view, citing an important sociological study by a lesbian advocate of gay marriage—which showed that many gays with no commitment to monogamy, indeed with a conscious desire to subvert it, planned to marry. The priesthood scandals take us beyond even this predictive research: They represent a concrete and historically important case in which a significantly expanded homosexual presence in an established institution did in fact result in the undermining of traditional sexual morality, rather than in a "sexual-domestication" effect.

In my exchange with Sullivan, I also challenged his "arithmetical rebuttal" of the cultural-subversion argument. Sullivan had argued that any subversive effect on marriage coming from the open promiscuity of gay-male couples would be numerically offset by the notable fidelity of lesbian couples. I countered this point with the example of a strict college honor code—one that leaves it up to students themselves to refrain from cheating, and to confront and report those who do cheat. It would take only a small number of rebels against this honor code to subvert it, I said, since any significant group willing to sign the pledge against cheating, while also openly acting and speaking in violation of the code, would tend both to "break the spell" of the code and to put honest students at a disadvantage. In effect,

this is what has happened with the open subversion of clerical celibacy: The open flouting of the rule, in belief and in practice, has helped to demystify it, and also put those who continue to uphold it at an unfair disadvantage. And particularly when it comes to the sexual abuse of minors, we have seen that egregious violations of a sexual code of honor by even a relatively small number of individuals can bring suspicion and discredit on an entire institution—and to the code that governs it.

The priest scandal also teaches a critical lesson about the time that it takes to undermine an institution. Defenders of civil unions in Vermont, for example, are fond of saying that since the advent of civil unions two years ago, “the sky has not fallen.” The answer is that the effect of civil unions and gay marriage on the ethos of marriage will likely percolate for years before the harm becomes evident—after which time it will be too late to turn back.

#### THE SKY THAT FELL

This is exactly what has happened to the Church. It has been at least 30 years since the homosexual presence in the priesthood began to increase markedly. All along there were signs of trouble, yet no profound institutional crisis. Only now, after three decades, is the Church experiencing an authentic emergency, one that has provoked calls for at least two sorts of solutions—removing or reducing the presence of homosexuals in the priesthood, or the abolition of celibacy itself. The first solution would drive away liberal Catholics, and devastate a priesthood that is now substantially homosexual; the other would represent a tremendous blow to traditional Catholics. After 30 years of gay marriage, it would be equally difficult to go back—yet the subversive effects of gay marriage on the ethos of marital monogamy could, by then, have reached a similar stage of emergency.

Of course, the lessons I am drawing from the priest scandal all depend on the idea that priestly celibacy and marital fidelity are in some sense related. They are. Celibacy is premised, in part, on the notion that a priest cannot be entirely faithful to both his wife and his vocation. In effect, a priest is married to the Church, and his celibacy expresses his fidelity within that holy marriage. Nowadays, many have lost the feel for celibacy’s rationale. We are wont to ask how a priest can knowledgeably advise a married couple when he himself isn’t married. But a priest’s authority in these matters comes from his exemplary personal sacrifice for the sake of fidelity to his Lord, his Church, and his flock. Likewise, marriage is based on mutual sacrifice and fidelity. It is only from within a Sixties-inflected culture of self-fulfillment that the sacrificial ethos of celibacy, of marriage—indeed, of Christianity itself—seems puzzling. So there is every reason to believe that the deliberate subversion of the Church’s teaching on priestly celibacy prefigures a broader attack on the ethos of monogamy under a regime of gay marriage. And of course, as I documented at length during the gay-marriage debate, numerous advocates of gay marriage openly advocate and promise such “subversion.”

Indeed, Andrew Sullivan himself gives us good reason to believe it: He has taken contradictory positions on the issue of marital fidelity. In his book *Virtually Normal*, Sullivan argued that the “openness of the contract” in many gay unions would actually strengthen heterosexual marriages: The rather free

gay unions would show straights that their marriages need not be threatened by adultery. This is a critically important passage, because in it, Sullivan effectively concedes the “subversion” argument. Once gay marriage is legalized, says Sullivan, the monogamous ethos of traditional marriage will be transformed by the sexual “openness” of gay unions. And that, Sullivan argued at the time, will be a good thing. In his exchange with me, Sullivan retreated from that position, at least on the surface, by arguing that gay married couples would likely be every bit as monogamous as heterosexual couples.

In the wake of the priest scandal, however, Sullivan appears to have moved back toward his more “subversive” position. Sullivan has responded to the scandal by highlighting his blanket opposition to Catholic teachings on sexuality—saying, for example, that he objects to the Church’s attitude toward “extra-marital sex.” So Sullivan himself has connected his attack on the priestly rule of celibacy with a broader set of objections to the Church’s position on all forms of non-marital sexuality—including, one presumes, those that require an open sexual contract. If this is the position on marital fidelity of the foremost conservative advocate of gay marriage, what are we to expect of the far greater number of gays who are not conservatives? The experience of the Church has clearly shown that even those gays who join the most traditional of institutions are radical enough to deliberately attempt to subvert its sexual mores. It is therefore no stretch at all to see the conscious subversion by gay priests of the rule of celibacy as foreshadowing the subversion of the traditional ethos of marital fidelity under a regime of gay marriage.

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Of course, the mainstream press has done everything in its power to deny or minimize the connection between the priesthood scandals and homosexuality. Here is a case where the bias of the mainstream press on social issues matters tremendously. How can people debate the effects of social and sexual changes that the press barely even acknowledges to have taken place?

And the press’s fears are justified. For the gay-marriage movement to be successful, it must be perceived as a struggle for civil rights. The press therefore refuses even to acknowledge the possibility that gay sexuality might be of any greater social consequence than skin color. The sky will not fall, we are told; yet for the Catholic Church, the sky is already halfway down. Advocates of gay marriage are fond of comparing those who warn against it to racists who purveyed silly scare stories about the effects of miscegenation. But the real model for gay marriage is the priesthood scandal. Here is a case in which gay sexual culture has not been tamed by, but has instead dramatically subverted, a venerable social institution—an institution built around an ethic that is a first cousin to marital fidelity itself. Should the connection take root in the public mind, gay marriage may not become a reality after all. NR