

The Advocate

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R E L I G I O N

Mass confusion

The Roman Catholic Church blurs the clear lines between homosexuality and pedophilia as a Vatican official pins the blame for the Boston sex-abuse scandal on gay priests **BY PETER FREIBERG**

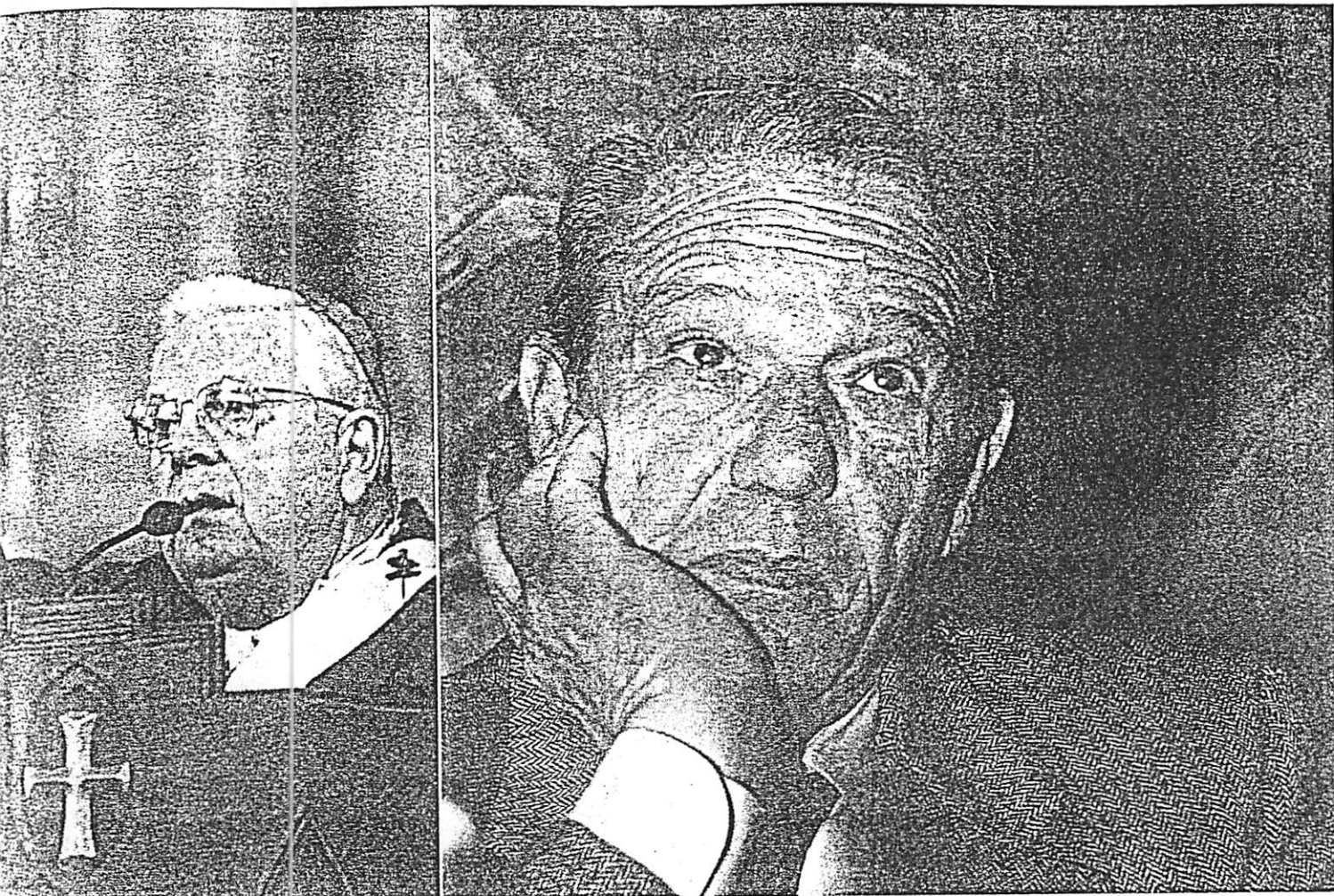
For the Roman Catholic Church, these are tough times. A burgeoning scandal over the hierarchy's coverup—in Boston and elsewhere—of hundreds of complaints of priests' sexual abuse of minors has provoked a national outcry and ripped through church credibility. So it would seem like the last thing the Vatican would want right now would be more controversy.

But that's exactly what it got after the Vatican's press office director,

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, dropped a verbal bombshell by asserting in March that gay men were to blame for the abuse and that they should not be ordained as priests. He even suggested that those already ordained be purged from the priesthood. The furor began immediately, serving to showcase a Catholic fact of life that church officials are extremely loathe to draw attention to—the large number of gay priests in U.S. parishes and religious orders.

Navarro-Valls, a lay Spanish psychia-

trist, made his remarks in a *New York Times* story on Vatican reaction to the sexual abuse scandal. Referring to the fact that most of the abuse allegations made public involve priests and teenage boys, Navarro-Valls said, "People with these inclinations just cannot be ordained. That does not imply a final judgment on people with homosexuality. But you cannot be in this field." He went on to compare gay men who become priests to gay men who marry women. Just as such marriages can be annulled by the



Catholic officials caught in a controversy (from left): Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Bernard Law, and Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls

church as invalid, he suggested, the ordinations could be similarly revoked.

Gay Catholics as well as a number of Catholic scholars immediately denounced Navarro-Valls's recommendations, calling them theologically unsound, probably impossible to implement, a desperate effort to scapegoat gays, and—if a purge is attempted—a severe blow to Catholicism. "This is nothing more than a vicious, transparent attempt to shift the blame in an effort to deny institutional culpability" in the scandal, says Mary Louise Cervone, president of Dignity/USA, a national gay Catholic group. "This [abuse] is about violence against children and abuse of power. It has nothing to do with sexual orientation."

A.W. Richard Sipe, a onetime Benedictine monk, longtime psychotherapist, and author who has studied priests' sexuality for 40 years, says Navarro-Valls's statement "runs

counter to every tradition in the church," in which love, service, and celibacy have been the primary criteria for ordination. Sipe's long-term study of more than 1,500 priests found that gay priests respect their vows of celibacy in the same proportion as straight priests. He estimates that at least 30% of the U.S. priesthood and a third of the bishops are homosexually oriented—and notes that some estimates run higher.

The scandal that drew the Vatican spokesman's comments began in January with revelations by the *Boston Globe* that Cardinal Bernard Law routinely reassigned a priest, accused of molesting more than 130 children over 30 years, from one parish to another without notifying parishes of previous complaints. Following an avalanche of criticism, Law handed prosecutors a list of more than 80 priests accused of sexual abuse over the years. Since January, according to *The New York Times*, at least 55 priests

in other dioceses across the country who were serving despite abuse accusations against them have been removed or suspended from their duties.

The damage to Law's reputation and influence, some Boston activists maintain, could help local gays politically, since he has been a fierce opponent of measures like domestic-partner benefits. The archdiocese itself has refrained from blaming gay priests for the abuse scandal, although its newspaper, *The Pilot*, hinted that gays were at fault in an editorial that asked for an examination of whether the priesthood attracts a "disproportionate" number of homosexuals and whether a "valid screening tool" exists to determine who is homosexual.

The Pilot editorial and Navarro-Valls's comments harked back to an era when gay men were routinely linked to pedophilia in the public mind—a linkage that mental health experts say has absolutely no basis in fact. ►

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Pedophilia, according to the American Psychiatric Association, is a disorder characterized by sexual activity with prepubescent children—boys, girls, or both. Other adults are drawn to older teenagers, says Fred Berlin, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University and a member of a commission appointed by Law to set guidelines for the church response to abuse allegations. But Berlin says, "There is no evidence whatsoever that [men] who are homosexual in makeup are any more a threat to boys than [men] who are heterosexual are a threat to girls.... Pedophilia is not something that is caused by, or related to, either heterosexuality or homosexuality."

Sipe estimates that 6% of priests get involved with minors 17 and under. In addition to his interviews with priests, Sipe's research included interviews with abuse victims and studies of court and media reports. The ratio of involvement with boys over girls is 4 to 1, but Sipe, who is straight, stresses that this does not mean four out of five priests who get involved with boys are gay. "I don't think that's fair," he says. "What the church is saying is that this is a gay problem, and it's not a gay problem; it's a problem of irresponsible sexual behavior and the violation of boundaries."

The involvement with boys, he says, is "homosexual activity, but that doesn't mean the person who's doing it is homosexually oriented." Similarly, he says, the extensive homosexual activity in prisons does not mean the participants are necessarily gay. Two thirds of priests, according to a 1970 study commissioned by the American Bishops, are immature psychosexually.

"They really haven't sorted out their sexuality; they may be bisexual," he says. Their "psychological immaturity," combined with the greater accessibility of boys, can "push [the priests] to this irresponsible behavior."

Furthermore, the sexual repression of enforced celibacy can generate secrecy, shame, and pathology among gay and straight priests alike, says John McNeill, a gay psychotherapist, theologian, and former Jesuit. While there is no explicit prohibition against gay priests, those who identify as such live in "a sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' world," says Dignity/USA executive director Marianne Duddy. Nevertheless, says McNeill, "everywhere I've gone in the world...the most effective priests...have been gay people. Gay people [are] extraordinarily open to spiritual values."

The impact of both the sexual abuse scandal and Navarro-Valls's proposed purge of gay priests remains uncertain. Cathy Renna of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation says most media coverage has been careful to avoid maligning gay priests and to indicate that pedophilia is not a gay issue. But no one can predict whether the current barrage of media coverage about "gay priests" molesting boys will give antigay activists fodder to reignite old fears of gay men as pedophiles.

McNeill notes that Navarro-Valls's proposal was greeted with silence by prelates in Rome and the United States, indicating, he believes, church officials disagree with it. It also flies in the face of the church's recent promise to "love the sinner and hate the sin" by embracing celibate gay men and lesbians.

However, last year the Catholic News Service reported that the Vatican intends to press harder to screen out potential priests with a "homosexual inclination," in line with its insistence that the orientation is an "objective disorder." The Rev. Donald Cozzens, a psychologist and author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, says any attempt to carry out a purge not only would be unfair to the "many gay priests and seminarians who lead lives of...celibate chastity" but "would be catastrophic for the pastoral life" of a church already facing a severe priest shortage. ■

Freiberg has also written for The Washington Blade and the New York Post.