

# The Advocate

The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine

**HOT SHOWS!**  
SUMMER THEATER GUIDE

www.advocate.com | JULY 23, 2002

## THE DANGEROUS LIVES OF GAY PRIESTS

Persecution, secrecy, devotion, hidden sex lives—real priests tell their stories. Plus: The Rev. Paul Shanley, the indicted pedophile who posed as a gay activist

ALSO INSIDE

BANNED GAY FILMS: FROM BARBIE TO ERNIE & BERT  
A DEFENSE DEPARTMENT INSIDER BREAKS HIS SILENCE  
CHRISTINA CRAWFORD'S NEW DISH

#668

15

\$3.99 USA • \$5.99 CAN • £2.99 UK



0109 1281 48220 0

# THE DANGEROUS LIVES OF GAY PRIESTS

Fearing a witch-hunt in the wake of the sex abuse scandal, gay Roman Catholic priests talk of their dedication to their work and their God—and of the secret loves that put their careers at risk

BY MUBARAK DAHIR

**T**wo years ago, in the Southwestern United States, a newcomer joined a secret support group of gay priests who meet regularly for dinner. Longtime member Father Brent was instantly attracted to the guest's "boy next door" looks. Newcomer Father James "spoke so sincerely and gently about his struggles being a gay priest—wanting to be honest about it—that I was touched in my heart," says Father Brent. "I wanted that too." [Priests identified only by first name have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.]

A week later, Father Brent phoned Father James, who lived about a two-hour drive away, and asked him out to dinner. "We both tried to pretend it wasn't a date," says Father Brent.

Not long after that dinner, Father Brent and Father James fell in love.

It was a complication neither had anticipated at the beginning of their careers. A high school convert to Catholicism, Father Brent had gone into the priesthood feeling "it was an opportunity to truly bring God's love to people. I wanted others to know the joy I had

found." As a parish pastor, he carries out the full range of priestly duties, from saying daily Mass to counseling married couples to blessing worshippers' rosaries. His most fulfilling task, he says, is preaching: "Bringing complex spiritual and scriptural issues to a level everyone can touch is exciting."

Father James came to the priesthood late in life, after working in the secular world. "I had an empty life," he says. "I felt everything I was doing was just for myself, and I wasn't giving anything back to others. I wanted more meaning."

By the time he met Father Brent, Father James had had other sexual liaisons. He knew that many priests—gay and straight—carried on clandestine sex lives. Father Brent figured he and Father James could continue in their furtive, long-distance love affair indefinitely.

Then leaders of the Roman Catholic Church began blaming gay priests for the sex scandals that are now haunting the church after decades of cover-ups. Illinois bishop Wilton Gregory, head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—the man who so eloquently apologized to victims at the June bishops'

conference in Dallas [see page 35]—had spoken of an "ongoing struggle" against the priesthood being "dominated by homosexual men." Philadelphia cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, who has ordered seminaries under his control to reject gay applicants, insisted that no gay man, celibate or not, could be "a suitable candidate for the priesthood."

The danger of a witch-hunt and public exorcism of gay priests—whether accused of sexual abuse of children or not—has become all too real in recent months. In March, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls suggested that one step in solving the sex abuse problem might be to root out and eject all gays from the Catholic priesthood. Then in May, Milwaukee archbishop Rembert Weakland was forced out of his job after a gay adult relationship some 20 years earlier was revealed. Weakland's accuser, Paul Marcoux, says the priest "date-raped" him in 1979, when Marcoux was 31 and Weakland was 52; the archbishop has indicated that the affair was consensual and that he cut it off in 1980 in order to return to a life of celibacy. In the 1990s, however, after threatening to file a ▶





lawsuit, Marcoux accepted \$450,000 in hush money from the archdiocese. When Marcoux went public in May, the pope accepted Weakland's resignation.

As the crisis brought unwanted attention to all gay priests, both Father Brent and Father James knew they would be forced to make a decision: Leave the priesthood or leave each other.

The gay priests and ex-priests who spoke to *The Advocate* for this story agreed that despite their devotion, despite their conviction that they have been called to the collar by God, it has always been difficult, even dangerous, to be both gay and a priest. Now, under a climate of intimidation, "the atmosphere has changed in a way like never before," says Father Brent. "I'm very scared. In the past they just wanted to silence us. Now they want to root us out. It's to the point where you have to make one of two decisions: Go into severe hiding or leave."

Will their sexuality lead the church to reject dedicated gay priests like Father Brent? The irony of that question is that it is often their sexuality that leads gay men to become priests in the first place.

Ordained a Mercedarian Friar in 1989, Steve Roszczewski admits he went into the priesthood at least partly "to save myself from asking the question. I told myself I wanted a religious life, but it really had more to do with hiding from being gay." Roszczewski soon found that the priesthood was a bad place to hide: His first sexual experience was as a teenager in seminary.

Of the more than 46,000 Roman Catholic priests now serving in the United States, anywhere from 15% to 50% are estimated to be gay. While it's impossible to pin down an accurate figure, many gay priests agree that homosexuals are disproportionately represented. As one put it, "Honey, we are legion inside the church."

Nevertheless, Roszczewski found "an impenetrable wall of silence in the church about sexual orientation." Nervous straight priests did their best to ignore gays among them. Gay priests were often distrustful of one another and anxious to keep from being outed. As a result, isolation and fear defined Roszczewski's life as a gay priest in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and St. Petersburg, Fla.

He tried unsuccessfully to sublimate his sexuality by throwing himself into the

work he loved. "As part of the church, I felt I was doing a lot of good for people in need," he says. In addition to his regular duties, he began visiting jails and ministering to men behind bars. But in contrast to the sermons, weddings, funerals, and baptisms over which he regularly presided as a revered figure in the community, his limited contact with gay society came solely in the form of bathhouses, adult bookstores, hustlers, and phone sex lines. As he puts it, "I vacillated between being the best little priest in the world and being a sex-crazed gay man."

When he was transferred to St. Petersburg in 1997, Roszczewski knew that his loneliness now outweighed the joys of his vocation: "As a parish priest, I was in the midst of so many loving people, yet I was desperately alone."

He began inching his way out of the closet and out of the church. He bought a key chain with a rainbow flag. He slapped a rainbow sticker on his car. And using the screen name "sacerdote"—Italian for priest—he cruised the chat rooms on Gay.com. "Things had gotten where I knew if I stayed a priest, I would be miserable," he recalls. "If I left, I would be happy. At this point, I think I really wanted to be discovered."

It wasn't long before his wish came true. When he got a phone call from his superior in Cleveland announcing an unexpected visit to Florida, Roszczewski knew he had been found out. He knew too that the church had for centuries been turning a blind eye to the sexual exploits of priests, regardless of their sexual orientation. Like so many others, he could have suffered a formal slap on the wrist and stayed in the church. But by this time Roszczewski was in love with a man he'd met on the Internet: "We met one night for Chinese food and we've been together ever since." Once his superior arrived in Florida, Roszczewski produced a letter asking to be released from his vows.

To be officially discharged, Roszczewski eventually had to write to the pope. In that letter, he said he wanted to be free to celebrate his life as a gay man and felt there was no place to do so in the priesthood. "My superior begged me to change my letter and just say I wanted to be released for 'personal reasons,'" remembers Roszczewski. "But I was tired of playing games. After 13 years of living a lie, it was time to tell the truth."

Tellingly, the Vatican released Roszczewski from his vows as a priest belonging to the order of Mercedarian Friars but not his vow of chastity—perhaps as a reminder that Roman Catholic doctrine holds that being gay is not a sin but homosexual acts are. Short of entering a heterosexual marriage, the only way for a gay Catholic to be virtuous is to be celibate. Because his celibacy vow remains formally intact, Roszczewski says, "In the eyes of the Vatican, I'm still a priest, but I'm a bit of a vagabond. It's like still being a doctor but having your medical license revoked."

He adds that he is "sadly not surprised" by church officials' recent moves to finger gay men as the chief culprits in the child sex abuse scandals. "It's a very homophobic institution. I honestly didn't expect anything less from them." The scapegoating and potential witch-hunt, he believes, are probably "the worst thing the church has done to gay priests in my lifetime. A lot of people are going to be driven even further into the closet. For a gay priest to come up for air at a time like this would take an act of God."

Not every priest can hide in the closet, even if he wants to. "You'd have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to know I'm gay," chuckles Father Dave, who's been a priest for 27 years. "That's been part of my downfall."

At age 5, he says, he wanted to be "God's best friend." Even as a kid, he went to Mass every day. "I've always been deeply committed," he says. At 18, he entered seminary: "I wanted to be a priest because I sincerely wanted to help people and to serve God."

He knew he was somehow different from other young men, but it wasn't until he was 21 that he came out to himself as gay. He approached the associate pastor of his Midwestern parish for counseling and advice. "The priest shared that he too was gay," recalls Father Dave. "I was very grateful he opened up. It meant I never had to question if I could be a priest because I was gay. It saved me a lot of emotional turmoil."

One evening, the associate pastor called Father Dave and asked if he wanted to go to the movies. A new film called *The Boys in the Band* was showing. At the theater, they ran into a group of other gay priests, who invited Father Dave to go out with them to the gay

bars. "I'd never been to a gay bar; they took me to three that night," he remembers. "In a funny way, it was really the church that introduced me to gay life."

By the time Father Dave was ordained, he was out to close friends and to his superiors. They ordained him, knowing he was a gay man, seemingly without hesitation. "My ordination was not a mistake," he says. "I am truly convinced I was called by God."

Things changed abruptly, however, on his first assignment in the Bible Belt. Though he wasn't out, it wasn't long before the laymen who worked with him in the church realized he was gay. "They made my life unbearable on a daily basis," he says about the verbal harassment and ostracism he faced. "They literally crucified me." He begged his bishop to reassign him.

In subsequent parishes, Father Dave says, he was mostly treated with kindness. "I'd find out that people in the parish knew and were talking about it for years," he says. "I looked at it as tacit acceptance." Furthermore, he says, "Every bishop I've ever worked for has known I'm gay, because it's in my file."

Three years ago, however, Father Dave was exchanging messages in a private online support group for gay priests when the cyber circle of friends "was infiltrated by a conservative right-winger," as Father Dave puts it. The spy then posted on the Internet the group's private notes—including some X-rated photographs the men had traded.

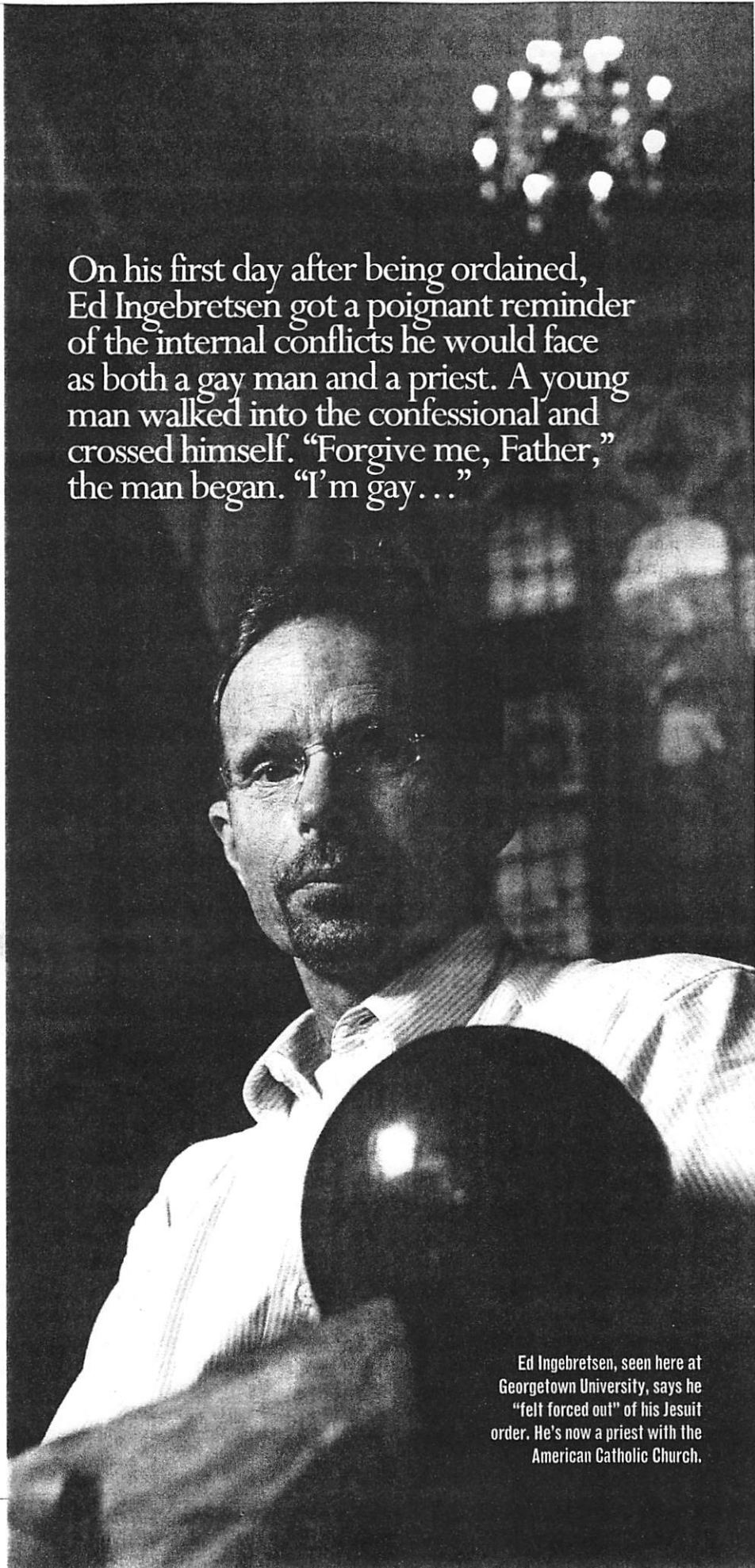
Despite his years of service as a parish priest, a hospital chaplain, and a prison chaplain, Father Dave was forced to retire and move to another state; he now holds a secular job. Though he is still a priest, he is not allowed to minister and probably never will be again.

Initially, says Father Dave, "I was incredibly angry. Now I just feel an enormous pool of sadness at the way the church treats gay priests." Despite his hard times, he insists. "I always knew this is what I should be doing. Even when the church seemed to have forsaken me, God was always by my side."

Many of the gay faithful who were not forced out, like Father Dave, have left simply out of frustration, anger, or exhaustion.

On his first day of work after being ordained as a Jesuit in 1981, Ed Ingebretsen got a poignant reminder of ►

On his first day after being ordained, Ed Ingebretsen got a poignant reminder of the internal conflicts he would face as both a gay man and a priest. A young man walked into the confessional and crossed himself. "Forgive me, Father," the man began. "I'm gay..."



Ed Ingebretsen, seen here at Georgetown University, says he "felt forced out" of his Jesuit order. He's now a priest with the American Catholic Church.



the internal conflicts he would face as both a gay man and a priest. As he sat ready to hear confessions at the Phoenix parish where he had been newly assigned, a young man walked into the booth and crossed himself. "Forgive me, Father," the man began. "I'm gay..."

For Ingebretsen, the son of a devout Irish Catholic mother, becoming a priest was "default mode," he says. "It was the only way I, as a gay man, could be both a good Catholic and a good son."

But if it was the desire to hide his sexuality that drew him to the church, other things kept him there. Ingebretsen was raised in "the tradition of the Catholic intellectualism of the left." He recalls one priest from his childhood being arrested and jailed for protesting the proliferation of nuclear weapons. "Growing up, it was the Catholic Church that stood up for moral and political issues. I wanted to be part of that."

Though his early pastoral work was as a hospital chaplain, Ingebretsen's passion was education. "Ideas were what always moved me," he says. "And the teachers who had inspired me most were priests." Being a priest and being a teacher, he says, share a common core: "to know the truth and speak the truth as you see it."

His values as a teacher and a priest, however, seemed to clash irreconcilably with the silence he maintained around his sexual identity and the ever-troubling pronouncements on homosexuality coming out of Rome.

A professor since 1986 at Georgetown, historically a Jesuit university, in Washington, D.C., where he now chairs the American Studies program, Ingebretsen in 1995 took the brave step of offering a course called "Unspeakable Lives: Gay and Lesbian Narratives." Though endorsed by the English department, his class met with ad hoc hostility from students and other faculty.

"I'd go to class half an hour early to clean the graffiti and clear the hostile notes that'd been slipped under the door," he says. The furor over the class as well as Ingebretsen's protest of the Vatican's silencing of New Ways Min-

istry, a gay-supportive Catholic group, triggered the Jesuits and church hierarchy to silence him. "I was specifically told by my rector to be quiet," he says.

Ingebretsen struggled within the church for another four years before taking a leave of absence that led him to legally transfer his credentials from the Roman Catholic Church to the American Catholic Church, a progressive religious movement that is independent of Rome and has about 25,000 members.

When Ingebretsen left the Jesuits, he was handed documents that said he was leaving the order of his free will and thereby could invalidate his ordination. "I refused to sign," he says. Not only did he not agree, he says, he felt the church—not himself, not the will of God—was responsible for his resignation: "I felt forced out."

**T**he priests and former priests who spoke to *The Advocate* unanimously agreed that their struggles were not with God's law but with man's—specifically, that of the men who are the highest officials of the Roman Catholic Church. Armed with the conviction that a higher power favors their continuing to serve, many steadfastly resist the earthly pressures to resign. Father William McNichols sincerely believes that God not only called him to the church but has repeatedly kept him from fleeing it. Ever since he was 5 years old, he says, he knew God was calling him to be a priest. "It's not like I hear voices or anything," he says with a laugh. "But I just know."

His family was not so easily convinced. After McNichols graduated from a

Jesuit high school in Denver, his parents urged him to postpone seminary and attend Colorado State University for a year. There and later at Boston University he studied his second great love—art. He recalls he was painting a copy of El Greco's portrayal of Christ in his Colorado dorm room when he felt "a message from God to go into the priesthood." He enrolled in seminary at age 19 in 1968—just one year before the Stonewall riots. "When I entered the Je-

suits, there was no other place in society for gay men," he notes. "I didn't even know there was a gay culture."

A year later, at 20, he realized he was gay and asked to see a therapist, who arranged for electroshock therapy. In repeated sessions over several weeks, 75 pulses of electricity per hour were applied to electrodes wrapped around McNichols's wrists and ankles. Ironically, it was a gay priest who saved McNichols from further torture. When he confided his course of therapy to a mentor, the older man came out to him as gay. "Don't you ever go back there," the gay priest told him. "God made you the way you are."

Almost a decade later, in 1977, while studying philosophy at Boston College as part of preparing for his ordination, McNichols came close to leaving the path to priesthood in order to explore the burgeoning gay life that was exploding around him. He confided his misgivings to a close gay friend. "We need good gay priests too," the friend responded. For McNichols, it seemed as if God was sending him another signal.

Before he was ordained in 1979, he told his superiors he was gay: "I wanted to go into it honestly." At the time, he says, "no one made a big deal about it."

In 1983, just as McNichols finished a master's degree in painting at Pratt Institute in New York City, his dual identities as a priest and a gay man once again came together. It was then that he got a phone call from Dignity USA, the national organization for GLBT Catholics, asking if he would do a Mass in honor of people who had died of what many were still calling "gay cancer." The Mass initiated a flood of phone calls. "People were phoning, saying, 'Would you come see my brother, my son, my lover?'" he recalls. "I knew God was calling me again too. This time he was calling me to an AIDS ministry."

In 1990, burned out after seven years of watching young gay men die, McNichols moved to New Mexico, where he studied under the well-known gay iconographer Robert Lentz. Eventually, McNichols landed in the archdiocese of Santa Fe, where he remains today and continues to celebrate the sacraments of the church. He was living there when, in 2000, he agreed to be interviewed by a reporter from *The Kansas City Star* for a

THE ADVOCATE  
**POLL**  
SPONSORED BY SUBARU

Do you know or  
have you ever met  
a gay Catholic  
priest?

Sign on to *The Advocate's* Web site  
before July 23 to cast your vote and  
leave your comments. Results will  
appear in the September 17 issue.

[www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)

series about priests dying of AIDS. Though not HIV-positive himself, he came out in the articles as gay.

The response from his largely Hispanic parishioners, he says, was "accepting and loving. I've never experienced so much support." Church leaders, however, were less thrilled by his outspokenness. "The church is petrified by the prospect of scandal," he explains. "What the hierarchy often fails to see is that by telling the truth, we remove the scandal.

"That's why I am speaking up again now," McNichols continues, with respect to gay priests being scapegoated for the church's sex abuse cases. "The church hierarchy thinks people will be scandalized by gay priests," he says, half-laughing at the irony of the revelation. "But people are scandalized at covering up the truth, not at me being gay."

He points out that not everyone in the church leadership is trying to blame gays

for the church's current woes: "I've personally gotten a lot of support from straight priests." And he says he is "stunned and consoled" that most Catholics seem to be rejecting the line that sex abuse in the church is the fault of gay priests. "This is a very painful episode for all Catholics," he says, "but I think it is good that it's come out because now the issues are finally being raised."

While it's too soon to tell whether the church will move forward or backward on the issue of gay priests, McNichols says, "The idea that somehow there won't be any more gay priests is an incredible fallacy. For centuries we've given so much to it, and we will continue to do so. Gay people represent the soul of the church."

Not all gay priests share McNichols's optimism. Father Brent and Father James, the two Southwestern gay priests, have decided to choose each other over

the church. "The atmosphere of hostility, suspicion, and rancor is not conducive to being a healthy, happy, whole minister for me," says Father James with regret.

And Father Brent says that "as a gay priest in the church, I feel like I'm a battered wife in an abusive relationship. I have to get out."

Both men are currently pursuing master's degrees in preparation for future careers outside the church. "I'll miss preaching and the liturgy," says Father James softly. "I'll miss being with people in their most profound moments of joy and grief. I entered the church because I thought being a priest would give me the voice to do so much good. For me, it's the saddest thing knowing that the only way for me to live an honest life of integrity is to leave the priesthood." ■

*Dahir has also contributed to Time, Men's Fitness, and Business Traveler.*

# The bishops' next move

The U.S. bishops' conference kept mum on gay priests, but some still fear a purge is in the works

**U**nder the international spotlight, U.S. Roman Catholic bishops convened in Dallas June 13-15 to hash out a set of guidelines on how to deal with priests who take advantage of children sexually.

Prior to the meeting, gay and lesbian activists as well as gay Catholics fretted that the bishops would formally adopt language blaming gay priests for the church's woes and seek to oust them. Before the conference and in the aftermath of revelations of widespread child sexual abuse and cover-ups, many high-ranking Catholic officials tried to spin the scandal into a story of how gay men have infiltrated the church in disproportionately high numbers.

And in fact, an antigay amendment was proposed at the conference by Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb. However, it was roundly rejected.

The final document, called the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," asserts that any priest who in the past abused a minor will now no longer be allowed to function as a pastor in a parish church, school, or hospital. Though the men will be allowed to

retain their titles as priests, they won't be allowed to wear the collar or say Mass in public. The document is mum on the issue of gay priests.

"It was almost anticlimactic for those of us expecting the gay issue to be a big battle," says Bill Mochon, an openly gay Los Angeles psychologist

who has counseled priests accused of sexually abusing minors. Mochon attended the bishop's conference as part of a panel of psychologists and psychiatrists. "Our job was to educate the bishops on the psychology of sexual abuse," he says.

The fact that gay priests were not singled out in the adopted statement, says Mochon, "is a clear indication that the bishops finally got the message that sexual orientation is not an element of sex abuse. Clinical studies prove time and again that being gay is not related to sexual abuse."

Mochon says he believes this is "the end of the association between sexual abuse and gay



Duddy in Dallas: "A witch-hunt [is] definitely going to continue."

priests for the bishops."

But not everyone shares his optimism. While conceding that "the absence of explicit language linking sexual abuse and homosexuality is a big victory," Marianne Duddy, executive director of Dignity USA, says she is "still frustrated that the bishops refused to issue either an apology or a retraction of

previous remarks blaming gay priests. They did a lot of damage with those comments."

Furthermore, she fears the issue of gay priests is far from settled. "For years there's been a witch-hunt by right-wing Catholics to intimidate and oust gay priests," she says. "That's definitely going to continue."

She fears that the targeting of gay priests will now simply go underground. Vatican inspectors, she notes, will soon be coming to visit American seminaries, ostensibly to make sure they are being run according to strict Catholic guidelines. "We think it's code for 'get the gays out of the seminaries,'" she says. "We're worried there will be a quiet purge." —M.D.