

Vatican bid to find gays in seminary stirs concern

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | September 16, 2005

An effort by the Vatican to look for evidence of homosexuality in Catholic seminaries is alarming gay rights advocates but is pleasing conservatives, who are hoping that Pope Benedict XVI will soon issue a ban on gay men as future priests.

The planned search for homosexuality is part of a Vatican review prompted by the clergy sexual abuse crisis of 229 American seminaries, theology schools, and other institutions that train priests. It is set to begin this month.

The chairman of the Boston College theology department, the Rev. Kenneth Himes, sharply criticized the review yesterday, saying that if the bishops really want to understand what caused the sexual abuse crisis, they should investigate their own offices.

"What really created the sexual abuse crisis was not poor formation [of priests] in the seminaries, but poor personnel management in the chanceries," Himes said. "Now we are having an investigation of the seminaries, but I wonder when the Vatican and the American bishops will investigate their own chanceries."

Church officials and their conservative backers said it would be irresponsible not to look at the role homosexuality might have played in the high rate of abuse by Catholic priests. A study performed for US bishops by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that, among 10,667 individuals who alleged they were abused by a priest between 1950 and 2002, 81 percent were male.

"You're trying to assess whether this institution is successfully forming men to live a celibate life, so you have to ask the question [whether] it is or is not doing that," said Monsignor Francis J. Maniscalco, spokesman for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. "You want to make sure that sexual activity, or tolerance of that activity, is not present in the seminary."

The Vatican has chosen 117 visitors, including Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley of Boston, to conduct the inquiries, which are to be largely completed by next spring. The last review of seminaries was conducted in 1983.

The investigators are supposed to examine 55 topics outlined in a set of guidelines and instructions developed by the Vatican and first reported yesterday by The New York Times. In addition to looking for "evidence of homosexuality," the document also asks the investigators to consider how church doctrine is taught at seminaries, whether there is "a clear process for removing from the seminary faculty members who dissent from the authoritative teaching of the church," whether "seminarians know how to use alcohol, the Internet, television, etc., with prudence and moderation," and whether the seminary encourages recitation of the rosary, among other concerns.

There are about 4,500 Catholic seminarians in the United States.

Maniscalco said the homosexuality question is appropriate, given the "preponderance of [abuse] victims of the male gender."

"Celibacy is a challenge to everybody, but is it a special challenge to the homosexual?" he asked. "Is the pastoral situation of the training something that might be conducive to discomfort on the part of heterosexual or homosexual candidates? In a situation where you have an all-male priesthood, is that significant in terms of the ability of people to go through the training? Is it fair to create a situation where there might be a subculture? These are the kinds of questions that have to be asked."

The seminary study was requested by American cardinals in April, 2002, when they visited Pope John Paul II to discuss the exploding sexual abuse crisis.

The church is looking into the question of homosexuality because some church officials believe there is a link between a high number of gay men in the priesthood and a high incidence of sexual abuse. But specialists say there is no evidence for such a link.

"There is no evidence that a male homosexual is any more risk to a boy than a male heterosexual is to a girl, and one of the problems within the church is that they are confusing the issue of homosexuality with the issues of child abuse and pedophilia," said Dr. Fred S. Berlin, an associate professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Berlin, who researches sexual disorders, served on commissions appointed by the US bishops and by the Archdiocese of Boston examining the crisis. "I'm not going to tell the church what its policy ought to be, but if it's based on an idea that gays are more of a threat to children than are heterosexual men, I don't think that data is out there," Berlin said.

There is no scientific data about the number of gays in the priesthood; estimates have ranged as high as 50 percent. Several conservative authors have argued that some seminaries now have a gay atmosphere that discourages heterosexual applicants.

"Priests who have an inclination to have sex with boys and young men are a very legitimate concern of the church," said the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, the editor of First Things, a magazine about religion and public life. Neuhaus said he would support a ban on admission to seminaries for "men who have an inclination to have same-sex sex."

C.J. Doyle, executive director of the Catholic Action League of Massachusetts, agreed. "The Catholic religion teaches in its catechism that homosexual behavior is grave depravity," he said.

"Persons who suffer from an unnatural sexual orientation are not appropriate candidates to serve in alter Christus," he said.

Brian Saint-Paul – editor of Crisis magazine, a Catholic journal – said, "The issue of homosexuality has to be part of the discussion, or they would be sweeping it under the rug. If they were to ignore that, they would be ignoring one of the factors that led to the sex abuse scandal.

"It is a bad idea to have homosexuals in the seminary. It would be a lot like having co-ed showers at a college."

But Saint-Paul also said, "I don't think a witch hunt is a good idea." He said he believes that in recent years seminaries have become more conservative and therefore less gay.

Gay rights advocates have voiced outrage at the consideration of a ban on gay seminarians.

"The church is making gay men a scapegoat for criminal pedophiles," said Joe Solmonese, who is the president of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay rights organization.

"Homosexuality and pedophilia have nothing to do with one another, and the idea that they ought to go through the church and root out suspected homosexuals seems so unwarranted," he said.

Daniel C. Maguire, a professor at Marquette, said: "They are going to exclude gays, when what they should exclude is mandatory celibacy, which I would describe as a failed experiment."

The possible ban is complicated by a lack of agreement on how seminaries would ascertain whether an applicant was homosexual, or even how to define homosexuality for a man who professes to be celibate.

"Is it someone who is sexually active, or someone who had a fleeting same-sex attraction 20 years ago?" said John L. Allen Jr., the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter. Allen said that some US bishops are urging the pope not to sign it, because it would lead to negative publicity and little change in policy.

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