

Gay Men Ponder Impact Of Proposal by Vatican

Some Priests and Seminarians Speak Out

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

Word that the Vatican is likely to issue instructions soon that could bar most gay men from joining the priesthood has set off a wave of anger and sadness among some gay priests and seminarians who say they may soon have to decide whether to stay or leave, to remain silent or to speak out.

"I do think about leaving," said a 30-year old Franciscan seminary student. "It's hard to live a duplicitous life, and for me it's hard not to speak out against injustice. And that's what this is."

In telephone interviews on Thursday with gay priests and seminarians in different parts of the country, all were adamant that their names not be used because they feared repercussions from their bishops or church superiors.

"I find that I am becoming more and more angry," said a 40-year-old priest on the West Coast who said he had not decided whether to reveal his homosexuality publicly. "This is the church I've given my life to and I believe in. I look at every person I come in contact with as someone who's created in the image and likeness of God, and I expect that from the church that I'm a part of. But I always feel like I'm 'less than.'"

The fears by gay priests and seminarians intensified this week after news reports from the Vatican that a long-awaited church document will bar gay men, even those who are celibate, from becoming Roman Catholic priests.

For years, most American seminaries and religious orders have not barred gay candidates outright, instead trying to discern in each case whether the man was capable of living the celibate life.

The ban would pertain only to candidates for the priesthood, not to those already ordained.

The church is also beginning an examination this month of American seminaries in which faculty members and students will be interviewed on admissions policies, adherence to Catholic moral doctrine, adequacy of preparation for celibacy and whether there is "evidence of homosexuality" in the seminary. Their reports will take years to complete.

Church officials say those measures will help address conditions that led to the priest sexual abuse scandal that resurfaced in Boston in 2002 and spread to many dioceses. A study commissioned by the American bishops found last year that nearly 80 percent of those abused were boys.

Some conservative priests welcomed the changes. The Rev. John Triglio Jr., president of the Confraternity of Catholic Clergy, a conservative 400-member group based in Harrisburg, Pa., said that barring gay men from seminaries was "for their own good," just as the church once barred epileptics from the priesthood.

"It's pretty much the same thing," Father Triglio said. "The work and the ministry of the priesthood is going to be too demanding and will put a strain on them. He's going to have to spend five to eight years in a seminary where he's only going to be with men."

One gay seminarian in his 30's responded that such reasoning was "ridiculous" and that he has lived harmoniously for four years with a group of mostly heterosexual seminarians.

"Homosexual men are socialized differently," he said. "We have spent our whole lives living and working with other men. We've been on the same school teams, shared the same locker rooms, been in the same fraternities, and we are accustomed to being around people to whom we are attracted. To suggest that because one has a homosexual orientation one is unable to control one's sexual impulses is, frankly, insulting."

He said "it would be hard to imagine" staying in the seminary, because "I take very seriously the church and the authority of the episcopacy."

Gay priests say they are being scapegoated for crimes committed by pedophiles and covered up by bishops who never faced any discipline. The interviews made clear that they now had the strong sense of being persecuted by their own church.

"I feel like a Jew in Berlin in the 1930's," said a 48-year-old gay priest who has spent 18 years in a religious order. He said he was considering donning a pink triangle — the symbol used by the Nazis — and getting heterosexual priests and members of the laity to wear the triangles as a protest.

Many of the gay priests said that the expected Vatican policy and the seminary visits would drive gay priests more deeply underground and create the same unhealthy, sexually repressed climate that prevailed in seminaries before reforms in the 1980's and 90's.

Some priests say they fear that by rejecting homosexual candidates the church will only worsen its shortage of priests. "It's like they have this plan to empty the church," said a gay priest on the East Coast.

Some church conservatives argue that, on the contrary, if seminaries bar homosexuals, more heterosexuals will step forward.

Sister Katerina Schuth, a professor at St. Paul's Seminary at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul who

An expected new policy is met with a wave of anger and sadness.

studies Catholic seminaries, said there was no evidence for that theory and added, "That is reasoning and speculation by people who have not spent any, or much time in seminaries."

Among parishioners at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, a working-class ethnically mixed neighborhood, worshippers leaving a Mass yesterday were divided on whether the policy would be helpful.

Helen Dunn, a retired teacher, said it was important to weed out gay men at the seminary level, "because that's where the problems start."

"They're looking for something they can't get," Ms. Dunn added.

Bruno Basedy, 55, an immigrant from Colombia, said that homosexuality was "no good" and demonstrated acceptable conduct by singing the theme from Wagner's wedding march.

But Max Gonzalez, 52, a retired phone company worker who arrived at the church just after Mass ended, said gay priests "don't bother me, as long as they're not bothering the kids."

Patrick Murphy, 37, an unemployed man who attended the Mass, said that while he considered homosexuality "an abnormality of the soul," he did not feel it was incompatible with a calling to serve God, nor did he think it appropriate for the church to try to purge celibate gays from the seminary.

"A person who chooses to be celibate is doing a noble act," Mr. Murphy said. "They're choosing to become sexual martyrs. So their sexuality shouldn't be exploited."

Several priests in New York said they were troubled by the direction that the Vatican seemed to be taking.

Msgr. Denis Herron, pastor of St. Teresa's Church in Woodside, Queens, said a commitment to celibacy was more important than a seminarian's sexual orientation.

"Some people can't make that commitment, and that can be heterosexuals or homosexuals," Monsignor Herron said. "I'm concerned that this could turn into a witch hunt."