

Gay Priests and Gay Marriage

What the one issue has to do with the other

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THE 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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