

50 CENTS

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Seminary inspections ordered

Vatican searches for homosexuality, lapses in church teachings

By Caryle Murphy
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Vatican has ordered an inspection of Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States to look for "evidence of homosexuality" and for faculty members who dissent from church teachings, according to a document containing guidelines for the year-long review.

The inspections of more than 220 seminaries and theological schools, set to begin lat-

er this month, was authorized in the wake of the church's child-molestation scandal. It will be carried out by a committee of 117 bishops and priests, who will break into small teams to visit each seminary for at least four days.

The Vatican's instructions are in an 11-page document detailing how the visits should be conducted. All faculty, students and graduates from the past three years are to be interviewed. Areas to be examined include whether "there is a

clear process for removing" dissident faculty; if seminarians "know how to use alcohol, the Internet, television etc. with prudence and moderation," and how students' "behavior outside the seminary" is monitored.

A copy of the document was obtained by The Washington Post from a priest.

The mandate to look for "evidence of homosexuality" reflects a concern among some

See SEMINARIES, A4, col. 1

SEMINARIES

Vatican orders inspections

Continued from A1

church officials and members that Catholic seminaries have become too tolerant of gay lifestyles. It also reflects the contention by some Catholics that the pedophilia scandal grew out of lax moral discipline and the presence of homosexuals among the clergy. Other Catholics dispute that view, saying there is no evidence that homosexuality leads to sexual abuse of children.

The Rev. Bill Bowling, the Archdiocese of Louisville's vocations director, said he believes that the results of the reviews may be favorable.

Most of the abuse allegations involving minors dated from the 1960s through the early '80s, he said. In recent years, seminaries have been more direct in instructing candidates about appropriate boundaries and psychosexual integration and maturity, he said.

"I think that they're going to find that ... (seminaries are) doing a much better job in screening candidates" and training them for the priesthood, Bowling said.

The Rev. Mark O'Keefe, president-rector of St. Meinrad School of Theology in St. Meinrad, Ind., is on the committee of priests visiting seminaries, spokeswoman Mary Jeanne Schumacher said. He was in Washington yesterday for orientation and unavailable for comment, she said.

The visit for St. Meinrad, which trains priests for both the archdioceses of Louisville and Indianapolis, will be the week of March 13, Schumacher said.

"We're very receptive to hav-

ing them visit us," she said.

The review begins as Catholics await a new Vatican directive on whether homosexuals should be admitted to the priesthood.

Some church scholars fear that directive may ban homosexuals from seminaries; others say a ban is unlikely but the directive may make it harder for homosexuals to enter the priesthood.

"I think it's certainly going to raise the bar" for seminary entrance, said the Rev. Stephen Rossetti, a priest and psychologist who heads St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Md., a facility that treats psychologically troubled clergy.

"I think there are some unique challenges for individuals with homosexual inclinations, and I think the church needs to face that," Rossetti said. At the same time, he added, the inspection should make clear that the standard for all seminarians is "chaste living."

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, who will oversee the seminary review, recently told the National Catholic Register that "anyone who has engaged in homosexual activity, or has strong homosex-

ual inclinations" should not be accepted into seminaries, even if their last such sexual activity was a decade ago. The Washington-based O'Brien, who heads the Archdiocese for Military Services USA, also said that the Vatican would be "coming out with a document about this," referring to the directive.

O'Brien was unavailable for comment Thursday.

The emphasis on homosexuality drew fire from the Catholic gay community. "The investigation of U.S. seminaries for 'evidence of homosexuality' continues the pattern of smoke-screening that church leaders have employed since the clergy child abuse crisis began," according to a statement by Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry in Mount Rainier, Md., a group supporting Catholic homosexuals.

"Why not look instead for evidence of cowardice, secrecy and dishonesty — the traits displayed by so many bishops which magnified the crisis into a public scandal?" DeBernardo said.

Staff writer Gregory A. Hall contributed to this story.