



## Catholic Scandals: A Crisis for Celibacy?

*The Real Story Behind Clerical "Pedophilia" & What It Means for Clerical Celibacy*

by *Leon J. Podles*

The Catholic Church has been the object of much unwanted attention, some of which it has brought upon itself. Dozens of cases involving clerical "pedophilia" have been tried in the courts, several priests have gone to jail, and various dioceses have had to pay out tens or perhaps even hundreds of millions of dollars (the exact sums are often in sealed settlements) to the victims.

There have been some high-profile cases: Bishop Symons of Palm Beach resigned after he admitted his sins with teenage boys. The archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Groer, was forced to resign after several seminarians complained that he had molested them. The diocese of Dallas had to pay out \$23.5 million in a case involving Rudolph Kos. The bishop of Bayeaux is being prosecuted for not reporting to the police child molestation by one of his priests. And most recently a media storm has raged around the archdiocese of Boston since it became public that a pedophile priest, John Geoghan, was transferred from parish to parish in the 1980s, with the knowledge of the archbishop, Cardinal Law.

In view of this, a long-suffering public often wonders whether the Church would not be better off with a married clergy. Of course, the Latin tradition of clerical celibacy has been under attack for a long time for various reasons (celibacy is never exactly what one would call popular), and the latest scandals have only served to make the question more pressing in the minds of many Catholics.

### **True Pedophilia Is Rare**

Philip Jenkins in his book *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 1996) tries to look at the problem objectively and dispassionately. According to Jenkins (who is not a Catholic), true pedophilia is extremely rare, is perhaps more common among Protestant clergy than among Catholic

priests, and is even more common among married laymen. There is certainly a problem in the Catholic Church (and other churches), but it is not exactly what the media make it out to be.

First, as to the nature of clerical misbehavior: *Pedophilia* refers to sexual desire for *pre-pubescent children*. This is extremely rare, and only a handful of cases in several decades have involved priests who are true pedophiles.

Almost all the cases reported in the media as pedophilia actually involve an attraction (which a priest has acted on) to adolescent boys who are sexually mature but under the age of consent, which is 18 in civil law and 16 in canon law. This behavior is a variety of *homosexuality*. Homosexuals are often attracted to very young men because they combine the charm of boyishness with sexual maturity. Such sexual attraction is called *ephebophilia*, which the ancient Greeks cultivated to some extent but which rapidly fell out of favor as Christianity transformed classical culture.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Catholic Church followed secular psychological advice that sexual involvement with minors should be dealt with quietly and privately, that the youth involved were more likely to be hurt by a public fuss than by the sexual involvement, and that sexual interest in minors could be disciplined and cured.

This opinion changed in the mid-1980s, when many of the cases that had occurred from the mid-1960s onward came to light. In this period of about 20 years, about 150,000 men had served as Catholic priests and religious in the United States. There were about 500 reported (not all proved) cases of sexual involvement with minors, thus involving 0.3 percent of the clergy and religious, and most of the cases involved fifteen- to seventeen-year-old boys. Since not all allegations were substantiated, Jenkins says the evidence “suggests an offence rate of 0.2 percent.” The archdiocese of Chicago did a survey of all its clergy files from the years 1951–1991, and found allegations against 2.6 percent of priests, allegations that may have been justified against 1.7 percent of them. Moreover, it found *only one* true case of pedophilia, which involved a priest and his small niece.

True pedophilia occurs most often within families; celibacy removes most Catholic priests from temptations of that sort. When it comes to pedophilia (not ephebophilia), clergy in churches that do not require celibacy have the same (if not worse) problems. The Catholic Church has been a target because it keeps good records, but the Episcopal Church has a comparable problem, and some of the worst cases have been in fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches—but these cases rarely receive public attention.

Jenkins also shows how the “pedophilia” cases in the Catholic Church (and the bungling way church authorities sometimes handled them) have been used by would-be church reformers as a tool to further their agenda: the end of clerical celibacy (and much else) in

the Catholic Church.

Ultimately, the chief beneficiaries of this misinformation and the disorder in the Catholic Church are the secularizers who want to undermine the moral authority of religion in society. The Nazis also were great exposers of clerical scandals, and it was not because of the greater National Socialist purity of heart (both Philip Jenkins in his book and Victor Klemperer in *I Will Bear Witness* refer to this anti-clerical campaign).

### **Homosexuality Is the Problem**

Second, and most important, Jenkins's analysis indicates that the true nature of the problem in the Catholic Church is not pedophilia, but *homosexuality*, which can lead to sexual relations with sexually mature but underage boys.

Neither the media nor the Church have made it clear to the public that most of the abuse cases involve teenage boys, for this would focus the issue on the problems of homosexuality, a topic that is not politically correct. By not making this clear, the media has given the impression that the Catholic Church attracts sick priests who like little children, as opposed to homosexuals who like teenage boys (not a good thing, but not as disgusting as pedophilia).

No one knows what percentage of clerics is homosexual, partially because it is not easy to define a *homosexual*, a modern category that contains many hidden, dubious assumptions. Is a homosexual a man who has ever felt the slightest sexual attraction to another male, or a man whose desires are largely directed to other men, or a man whose desires are exclusively directed to other men, or a man who acts on these desires, or a man who structures his personality around these desires?

Certainly an occasional homosexual desire does not make a man homosexual any more than an attraction to his secretary makes a heterosexual married man an adulterer. Temptations are often given to test the soul. What most people mean by a homosexual is a man who acts on a sexual desire for a man or whose personality is structured around that desire.

What percentage of clerics are, in fact, homosexuals in any of these senses? Donald Cozzens, the rector of the Cleveland Roman Catholic seminary, in *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, quotes figures from 23 percent to 80 percent. He suspects that the priesthood has become or is rapidly becoming a gay profession, one in which heterosexuals are increasingly uncomfortable.

From my own experiences with clerical homosexuals, I suspect that the figure is well under 20 percent, although this is still 7 to 8 times the occurrence in the general

population. The Vatican's request for better screening has been ignored like everything else the Vatican says. Indeed, the guidelines put out by the American bishops clearly envision the possibility of accepting "gay" candidates if they agree to be celibate.

In the 1960s, I thought I might have a vocation, and I applied to a seminary program. Other applicants and I went through a psychological evaluation that may have been aimed at weeding out general nut cases and homosexuals. It failed on both accounts. In retrospect I would guess that a quarter of the people in the program were homosexuals or effeminate. My roommate was a homosexual, and when he approached me, I left the seminary within hours.

I reported this incident to the authorities. The first words of the rector were symptomatic: "Why me? Why me?" He didn't like the problem (who would?), but his focus was on avoiding problems for himself. I was astonished when the offender was allowed to continue. He was only asked to leave years later when he spent all his free time in gay bars. Perhaps the rector did not report the offender to other authorities (like Evelyn Waugh's schoolmaster, who was handed on from one school to another to get rid of him). The offender continued to offend, and eventually he died of AIDS. Friends I know who had been in other seminaries reported similar behavior—and a similar lack of response by the authorities.

One seminary, known internationally as the Pink Palace, hosted a lecture by a famous scholar. I attended, but learned much more from the conversation around me than from the lecture. One cleric inquired of a professor at the seminary about a Celtic Spirituality course; the professor responded that unfortunately the course was no longer available. The priest who taught Celtic Spirituality had been sleeping with the seminary students and flaunting it. The flaunting was the offense, and the offender was sent to rural Pennsylvania to rusticate. The seminary was apparently as pink as it was painted. In the same diocese, a diocesan priest and chancery official was a columnist for the *Washington Gay Blade*. He showed up at a city council hearing to offer support to those testifying for a gay rights bill.

### **A Bad Effect**

Third, apart from the legal troubles and bad publicity, what effect does the presence of homosexual clergy have on the Church? Cozzens claims that the presence of homosexuals in the seminary and priesthood tends to discourage heterosexual candidates. Celibacy is hard enough, but to be put in a situation in which being celibate is (with some reason) equated with being homosexual makes it even harder.

Homosexual priests also have an interest in distorting church teaching. The year before Bishop Symons of Palm Beach was deposed after he admitted contact with teenage boys,

his diocese, with his approval, hosted a retreat on homosexuality by the notorious Robert Nugent and Jeannine Gramick. Symons defended them from conservative lay critics, no doubt because Nugent and Gramick represented what the bishop liked to think was “the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church” on homosexuality. But the Vatican disagreed and has severely disciplined Nugent and Gramick, and removed Symons from office (he has since been “cured” and has resurfaced in the Midwest).

### **Lack of Masculinity**

What is the source of the probably disproportionate number of homosexuals among the Catholic clergy? Does the Latin tradition of ordaining only unmarried men who promise to remain unmarried contribute to this problem? Obviously, the percentage of homosexuals is larger among the unmarried than among the married, but most single men are not homosexuals. Why are there so many homosexuals among the clergy? Why would homosexuals be especially attracted to the priesthood?

An underlying problem, which I treated at length in my book, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*, is that for centuries the churches of Western Christianity have been seen by both men and women as belonging to the feminine sphere of life, just like nursing, cooking, and the care of small children. Consequently, men who are attracted to careers in the Church often have a weak sense of masculinity, have difficulty dealing with men and therefore prefer to deal mostly with women, and have personalities that tend to pick up a feminine savor; they are, in short, more or less effeminate. Now an effeminate man certainly may be heterosexual, but homosexuals are much more likely than heterosexuals to be effeminate.

Not only does this effeminacy increase the likelihood of a cleric’s being a homosexual, but it can also often lead to apathy in the face of clerical sexual misbehavior. Most men are outraged by a homosexual advance to a youth, not only because it is wrong, but also because it encourages the youth to deviate from heterosexuality, a crucial constituent of masculinity. The absence of this normal male outrage among bishops and other religious leaders has been astonishing and disquieting, and is a symptom of another and deeper problem, a lack of masculinity.

### **No Second Chances**

How could the Church avoid having such a large number of homosexuals among the clergy, a problem that is both the consequence of the feminization of religion and a cause of further feminization? If church leaders wished to address the problem, they could do many things.

It should be obvious that any cleric who has sexual contact with a minor should be immediately defrocked. No second chances. Such conduct indicates a weakness of character that makes him unfit to be a leader in the Christian community. Clerics who insist on identifying with the gay lifestyle should also be removed, even if they claim to be continent. Such a distortion of the male personality makes them unfit for church leadership, which is based on male headship. Men who are privately struggling with homosexual temptation can be counseled; such cases demand individual counseling and perhaps treatment.

A more heterosexual celibate clergy would certainly be desirable but in itself would not end sexual scandals. One scandal, right out of the infamous book *Maria Monk*, recently surfaced in Africa: A priest impregnated a nun, arranged for an abortion in which she died, and then said her funeral mass. Heterosexuals are quite as capable of sexual misbehavior as homosexuals are, and Archbishop Marino, Jim Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart are disgraces to the ministry. Heterosexual scandals are a big problem in Protestantism, according to Jenkins, but because they do not fit into a story line that can be used to attack celibacy and the authority of the Catholic Church, they do not get nearly as much press.

### **A Married Clergy?**

Would a married clergy help the Catholic Church? It has not been a panacea for Protestant churches. It has not prevented them from having problems with homosexual clergy. The Episcopal Church has a married clergy and has long had a substantial contingent of homosexual clergy (the Anglo-Catholic spike is a stereotype in British fiction). Episcopalians tell me that laymen assume that an unmarried priest (with rare exceptions) is a homosexual. The rector of the Ecumenical Institute at St. Mary's in Baltimore was at one time an unmarried Episcopalian priest; he was arrested and convicted for molesting a child in his parish. He was replaced by a good Presbyterian minister with a large family.

And clerical marriage brings its own problems, too little acknowledged in the discussion of celibacy. First, there is the problem of clerical infidelity and divorce. The opportunity to marry does not seem to have reduced the occurrence of clerical sexual sins, even among the conservative churches. These often have a particularly destructive effect on a local church because of the violation of the cleric's marital vows and those of the woman (or women) with whom he was having an affair. Further, what can be done with a divorced pastor? Even if he is blameless (and generally fault is shared), he is no longer a model to his flock of Christian marriage. And finally, there is the problem of clerical romances for those clergy looking to be married. This includes not only the temptations of dating but also the inevitable gossip and other disruptions of the church's life.

Second, there are problems raised even by good clerical marriages. Many clerical marriages are exemplary and edifying, but the lot of a married cleric is not easy. The wife and children are under the strictest scrutiny. The wife finds that she is not mistress in the rectory, because the vestry wants to run every detail of her life, down to counting the towels. When the children misbehave (whose children don't?), they are a double burden to their father. If the pastor has a small family, he is not an example of faithful generosity to Christian congregations that aren't even reproducing themselves. If he has a large family, he is condemned to live in poverty or become the object of resentment by parishioners, who feel that they can't afford a large family, so why should the pastor?

Would ending celibacy perhaps at least provide more candidates for a shrinking Catholic clergy? But the mainline denominations have also all been hit with a clergy shortage, even though half of their seminary students are now women. Without the women, large numbers of pulpits would be vacant. In Scotland, for example, the number of candidates for the Church of Scotland declined by 70 percent between 1992 and 1999. The Greek Orthodox Church in the United States has a shortage of clergy even though they can be married and have an average starting salary of \$60,000. In modern Western cultures, the ministry is not a popular profession: high educational requirements, low pay, and little respect.

Further, isn't celibacy unnatural? It must lead to problems if not scandals. Couldn't the energy that is needed to maintain celibacy be directed elsewhere with more effect? The work that the hierarchy put into the chronic struggle of the medieval church against concubinage might have been better used in evangelizing laity or in missionary work. The Reformers gave up the fight, deciding it was better to have a clergy in Christian marriage than an unmarried clergy in concubinage, and put their efforts into much needed instruction of the laity. The Reformers argued that celibacy is almost impossible for men, that it opens the Church to abuses and scandals. They were certainly correct about the state of discipline in the late medieval Church, but their arguments prove too much. As historians have noted, the Reformers who released monks and nuns from their vows because continence was impossible then had to convince unmarried young men and women that continence was possible.

### **The Tradition of Celibacy**

Why is the Catholic Church so stubborn about maintaining celibacy? Wouldn't it be an ecumenical gesture to the Eastern Orthodox and Protestants to allow a married clergy in some form? To understand the reluctance of the Church to change its discipline in the West, we must look at the history of clerical celibacy. The tradition, despite allegations that it is of medieval origin and was motivated by a desire to stop the alienation of church property, in fact dates back to apostolic times.

Christian Cochini's *The Apostolic Origins of Clerical Celibacy* surveys and analyzes the practice of celibacy in the early Church. From the fourth century we find widespread (although not unanimous) evidence that the Church indeed ordained married men, but expected them to refrain from relations after marriage. Early Christians felt great (although perhaps not totally warranted) confidence in the ability of Christians to remain continent within and outside marriage.

The Eastern Church in the Council of Trullo (691) cited previous councils (Cochini claims they misunderstood the earlier decrees) and confirmed what must have been an existing practice (how ancient, we do not know) of allowing married priests to have sexual relations with their wives. This became the law in all Orthodox churches.

Despite this legislation, both East and West felt a strong affinity between celibacy and the priesthood, but expressed it in different ways. In the East a priest, if widowed could not remarry; the bishop was chosen from the monks and was therefore always a celibate; a married priest was expected to refrain from intercourse before celebrating the Eucharist, which was therefore increasingly restricted to Sunday. In the West the problems that a married but celibate clergy created led the Church to ordain only unmarried men. Some Catholics (like Cochini and Stanley Jaki) allege that the East changed the universal apostolic practice of clerical celibacy, and Rome's acceptance of married clergy in the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome has always been somewhat grudging.

### **Changes in Discipline**

However, there may have been more than one apostolic tradition, and in any case the change in the East would have been within the authority of the Church to adapt (without rejecting) apostolic traditions. Similarly, the disciplines surrounding baptism changed radically in the early Church, as baptism became not the beginning but the end of a process of conversion. Penance was at first public, and a sinner after baptism had only one opportunity in his lifetime to confess and do penance. Now Catholics are encouraged to confess monthly.

The Catholic Church itself has made changes in the law of celibacy. Even the Western Latin rite has received married Protestant clergymen, ordained them, and allowed them the use of marriage. It has also ordained married deacons and allowed them the normal use of marriage (contrary to the ancient canons of the West), and it may decide to permit widowed deacons to remarry (contrary to the canons of both East and West). The Roman Catholic Church therefore could, if it followed Orthodox practice, still maintain some tradition of celibacy.

But, it must be said, those traditions that still connect the clerical state with celibacy (such as choosing bishops only from monks) are also under attack in Orthodoxy, and



most Orthodox churches will ordain only married men as parish priests. It would be difficult to maintain any meaningful tradition of celibacy in the West if any large-scale changes were made. Further, and worse, the mere fact of change would encourage those in the Catholic Church who also want women priests and homosexual marriages.

## The Good of Celibacy

Apart from an admirable conservatism and general reluctance to change ancient traditions, what is the Christian value of celibacy? Why did the tradition grow up in the first place? Paul counseled even the married laity to refrain from relations for a time so as to make space for prayer (1 Cor. 7:5). Sexual relations, like eating food, is good, but abstention from food and sex in preparation for prayer, especially the greatest prayer, the Eucharist, is a sign that entry into the New Creation to some extent precludes full participation in the old creation, even the good parts of it.

In the Old Testament, despite the importance of reproduction for the Jewish people, priests separated from their wives during their time of service in the temple, and soldiers separated from their wives while engaging in war, which for Israel was a religious act. The early Church felt that what was true for the Levites was *a fortiori* true for the priests of the New Covenant. The priest's identity finds its center in his offering of the Eucharist. All his other duties and powers flow from this. He must be ever ready to offer the Eucharist, and indeed the custom began early in the West of the daily Eucharist ("give us this day our daily bread" was thought first of all to apply to the Eucharist).

It was also felt that the marital relation tied a man too closely to the order of creation and made it harder to offer the Eucharist with an undivided heart (*simpliciter* is the word used in the canons). Continence has a positive role in preparing for a fruitful administration and reception of the sacraments. If the laity were willing to abide by the ancient discipline of abstaining from intercourse for three days before receiving the Eucharist and for the whole of Lent, perhaps it would not be necessary for the clergy to be celibate (no one has suggested this reform!). Clerical celibacy was a source of contention even in the patristic period; clerics were often punished for violating the canons.

Celibacy is a special thorn in the flesh of our sex-saturated culture and is therefore perhaps even more important today than it was in previous generations, which held marriage more in honor. Celibacy proclaims that it is possible to live without sexual pleasure, a rebuke to those who make sexual pleasure the center of their lives and justify horrendous actions (such as abortion) by the impossibility of refraining from sex. The mere existence of a celibate clergy that is largely faithful is a sign to all those who are not married (and perhaps cannot marry) that it is not an impossible burden to refrain from sex. While a lively monasticism might help the laity realize this, a parish clergy keeps celibacy before the eye of the laity at all times. This involvement with the life of the laity

makes celibacy both more difficult and more valuable.

### **Sign of Trouble**

Perhaps celibacy also serves in the Catholic Church like the canary in the mines: Problems with celibacy might be the first sign that something else has gone wrong. Both celibacy and Christian marriage must have a firm foundation in ordinary Christian asceticism: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, reading of Scripture. Especially in our sex-saturated culture, anyone who is serious about maintaining chastity—married or single—has to refrain from many amusements (such as much that's on TV and in the movies), and has to be serious about prayer.

Even the sacrament of confession has been neglected today by priests at a time when there is all the more need for spiritual counsel and direction. The difficulties with celibacy are simply an egregious manifestation of a general lack of discipline in the Church, a discipline that must be mostly self-discipline, and a symptom of a laxity and worldliness that were encouraged by some of the changes after the Second Vatican Council.

Christians can live out the apostolic faith in different ways. The Roman Catholic Church can maintain its tradition of celibacy in the Latin rite without regarding the tradition of other churches as second class. The celibacy of one part of the clergy would be a valuable gift that the Roman Church could offer to the rest of Christendom.

### **A Special Responsibility**

Because of the chronic hostility of the world, the Church must maintain the discipline of celibacy with great strictness. Human nature will not change until the Parousia, but laxity and immorality are not inescapable. Not every period of the Church has been as bad as the current one (although some have been worse). The nineteenth-century French skeptic Ernest Renan was no friend of the Catholic Church, but he says of the clerical scandals of his time: "The fact is that what is commonly said about the morality of the clergy is, so far as my experience goes, absolutely devoid of foundation. I spent thirteen years of my life under the charge of priests, and I never saw the shadow of a scandal [*je n'ai pas vu l'ombre d'un scandale*]; I have known no priests but good priests." While sexual desire will continue to give us trouble until the end of time, ecclesiastical practices and discipline can be adopted that may produce clergy who lead exemplary lives.

It bears repeating that the vast majority of today's scandals in the Catholic Church are due to homosexual priests, who would not marry and raise families even if they were given the opportunity. The problem is how to eliminate homosexuality from the priesthood.

The chief remedy for difficulties all clergy experience—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—is not more therapy and better legal and disciplinary procedures (although all these are necessary), but prayer, penance, and spiritual discipline, by the clergy and laity of all denominations. Both clerical (and lay) celibacy and clerical (and lay) marriage should be exemplary.

While Christian celibacy and Christian marriage can be a witness to our society, I think celibacy is both more difficult and more needed today. The clergy bear a special responsibility before God and man, for as Chaucer said, “If gold rust, what will iron do?”

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