

Is Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse Related to Homosexual Priests?

New Study Documents a Strong Link

by Matthew E. Bunson

On Nov. 2, the Ruth Institute published a new report that dares to ask a question many researchers — and Catholics — have been afraid to ask: What has been the role of active homosexuality and homosexual subcultures in the priesthood and in seminaries on the sex-abuse crisis?

The report — which indicates a very strong correlation between homosexual priests and homosexual subcultures and the incidence of clergy sexual abuse — is in part a response to the two important studies commissioned by the U.S. Bishops in the face of the sex-abuse crisis that were conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The 2004 study was entitled, “The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States,” and the 2011 report was called, “The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010.”

The 2011 report was heavily criticized at the time of its release for its assertion that it found no evidence that homosexual priests were to blame for the abuse crisis, despite the fact that more than 80% of the victims were male and that 78% were postpubescent. Critics claimed that the report bowed to political correctness and fear of a backlash in academia.

Seven years on, the Ruth Institute has weighed into the research of the sex-abuse crisis, specifically addressing the issue of homosexuality. A global nonprofit organization, the Ruth Institute was founded by Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D., to help study and find solutions to the toxic impact of the sexual revolution. The new report was the work of Father D. Paul Sullins, Ph.D., a senior research associate of the Ruth Institute. Father Sullins recently retired as professor of sociology at The Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C., and has focused on same-sex parenting and its implications for child development, the trauma that women suffer following abortion, and the impact of clergy sex abuse. A former Episcopalian, Father Sullins is a married Catholic priest.

The central thrust of the report is that the share of homosexual men in the priesthood rose from twice that of the general population in the 1950s to eight times the general population in the 1980s, a trend that was strongly correlated with increasing child sex abuse. At the same time, a quarter of priests ordained in the late 1960s report the existence of a homosexual subculture in their seminaries, rising to over half of priests ordained in the 1980s, a second trend that was also strongly correlated with increasing child sex abuse.

Father Sullins spoke to the Register about the report on Oct. 31. Aware of the controversy that will surround any effort to research the possible role of homosexual priests in the clergy sex-abuse crisis, including the likelihood he will be demonized and called a homophobe, he said bluntly, “To people who hate the truth, the truth looks like hate.”

It is probably safe to say that your report is going to spark some controversy. Why do you feel that this type of study is so long overdue?

There is a widespread denial of any possible negative effects of homosexual activity or any findings that might not be benign for homosexual persons in the scholarly realm. And I think that, to some extent, that's true for the scholarly work that's been done on Catholic clergy sex abuse. There's not been a willingness to confront the evidence on this topic, and I don't know if I want to speculate further than that.

Do we have clerics who just don't want to see or don't want to know that we may have embedded homosexual activity among priests that's wreaking harm in some ways to the Church? That may be the case. We have found in the last six months that there's a possibility that bishops have not pursued a wide knowledge on this topic.

Some have called it a cover-up. There's evidence that there's a lack of energy or interest in finding out the relation of homosexuality to this activity. I don't know if I would call it a cover-up. I may have used the word "cover-up" in the paper just to go along with the common term, but it may be if there's a cover-up that it's also extended to releasing data about the sex abuse and in authorizing folks to look at it. For example, in the data release to the John Jay Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice — which, by the way, did two wonderful reports on abuse with a lot of very helpful information — the data that the bishops released to them, the diocese was de-identified. They were not able to tell in what diocese the instances of abuse occurred.

Why do you think that was?

Well, I don't know why that was. Typically, you will de-identify individuals because you don't want to impugn the reputation of individuals. That makes a lot of sense. But if you have an institution where you have a widespread problem, whether it's abuse or embezzlement or theft or whatever, you'd like to know in what sectors of that institution that occurred more frequently than others. Typically, you would like to say, "Well, over here in this division, they had a great record. Let's try to see what we can do to make the whole institution more like this division, so as to reduce this unwanted behavior." That did not occur here. Could it be that the bishops, some bishops, did not want to know, did not want to have people know what dioceses were better and what dioceses were worse? I don't know.

We know from what John Jay College did report that there were a number of dioceses who had no or very few instances of sex abuse over the last 50 years. We don't know what those are. That might be a kind of a cover-up, or not letting us know everything that we would like to know in order to address the abuse.

Now, by contrast, the recent grand jury report from Pennsylvania put everything out there. We know exactly where and when each instance of abuse occurred. I do look at that data to some extent in this report, and it's very helpful, but we have a possibility to do much more investigation and report on data like that, which will begin to let us know: Were there dirty dioceses and clean dioceses? We'd like to know that about seminaries. Were there dirty seminaries and clean seminaries? We have these reports of homosexual subcultures and seminaries that have been affected by abuse. We don't know what seminaries those are. Wouldn't it be helpful to us if there was a handful of seminaries that were really spawning this kind of behavior and lots of clean seminaries that weren't? It would really help us a lot to be able to know that in order to address this problem and to eliminate it as best we can and for the safety and security of our children, particularly our young boys.

When you read the John Jay Report when it first came out, what was your initial reaction to it?

Well, actually, I didn't read it when it first came out. Like everybody else, I kind of glanced at it, but I have read both John Jay Reports recently. We should say [John Jay] came out with a report in 2004 on the nature and scope of the abuse and followed that up in 2011 with a great study on the causes and context

to the abuse. And in between those two, they had gathered more data; they had surveyed some of the offenders and so had access to some clinical data that really was very helpful and reported very well. My analysis focuses mostly on that second report, and what I take issue with is the conclusion that the abuse was unrelated to the presence of homosexual men in the priesthood over the period of abuse.

The John Jay Report in 2011 denied that that was the case because they said that the trend of abuse did not correspond with the trend of homosexual men in the priesthood. So that abuse was highest in the mid-1970s. But the reports of homosexual activity in the seminaries did not increase until the 1980s. So they argued that since by the time we were aware that they had these kinds of lurid homosexual cultures and homosocial activities in the Catholic seminaries, the abuse was already declining so it couldn't have had anything to do with that activity or with the presence of homosexuals. And so I critically examine that thesis. I really don't have a general criticism of the John Jay study at all. In fact, I have a lot of appreciation and admiration for that study.

But for that particular point, I point out that the percent of homosexual men who are ordained in any year or the presence of homosexual activity in seminaries can't relate very strongly to the percent of homosexual priests in the priesthood. Because each year we ordain a relatively small proportion of new priests. It's about 1%. So even if all of that 1% were homosexual, it doesn't affect the percent of homosexual men and the priesthood very much at all. What we have to do is to look at what percentage of men were of a homosexual orientation in the entire presbyterate in any given year in order to see if that is correlated with the incidents of abuse — and even more importantly to see if that's correlated with the percent of victims who were male in any year. And so that's what I do in this report.

I use data from a survey that was done in 2002 that measured the sexual orientation of Catholic priests and used a modified Kinsey scale, which in this case was a five-point scale, measuring from a completely homosexual orientation to completely heterosexual orientation and then categories in between; and also ask about year of ordination and the year of birth. And so from that, I'm able to compute what percentage of priests reported a homosexual orientation in any given year, going back to the 1950s. And when I overlay that trend with the trend and abuse, it's almost a perfect correlation. The correlation is 0.98. A perfect correlation is 1.0. So it's as close an association as you can get.

In the 1950s, about 3% of priests were of a homosexual orientation, by their own reports. By the 1980s, that had risen to over 16%. So we have sort of a fivefold increase in the percentage of priests who are homosexual, in a pretty straight line from the 1950s through the 1980s. And we have a very similar increase in abuse incidents over that same period, and we don't know the sexual orientation of any particular abuser. So we're inferring from the association of those two correlations that there's some influence of one on the other. So my conclusion has to be the opposite of that of the John Jay Report.

It's almost axiomatic among a number of very prominent figures in the Church that there is no correlation, and they cite the John Jay Report. And then we can add to that anyone who tries to investigate that type of a correlation is often accused of either scapegoating homosexual priests or of outright homophobia. What is your response to that?

I've been called homophobic and hateful before for studying these kinds of things. I would say that if it's a choice between being called homophobic and allowing more young boys to be abused, I would choose to be at risk for being called homophobic.

The question is: Are we on the side of abusers? Are we on the side of victims? I think that the words of Our Lord about the importance of young children and the horribleness of those who would lead such young children astray in my mind outweigh anything that someone could call me. I'm not hateful toward

anyone, to my knowledge. ... I don't think that these results in any way imply that homosexual persons are natively inclined or internally inclined to commit abuse at a greater rate than heterosexual persons.

In fact, we know that that's not the case. Most child abuse that happens in most settings is perpetrated by heterosexual males. It's usually in families, and so I don't think that in any way we can infer these results to something that generally happens with homosexual persons.

I do look at the influence of these homosexual subcultures in seminaries, in encouraging and promoting abuse. And I find that it explains about half of the high correlation of the abuse with the percentage of homosexual priests. So something was going on beyond just mere sexual orientation to encourage this horrible immoral activity that has wrought such harm to so many victims.

My experience in studying homosexuals has been this: that to people who hate the truth, the truth looks like hate.

You mentioned in your research that there is this presence of a homosexual subculture in a lot of U.S. seminaries. And as you've also noted, that the John Jay Report was unable to identify specifically which seminaries were particular problem areas for that, what needs to be done in your view with respect to seminaries in order to address this problem, especially given the high likelihood — as we are seeing globally in places like Honduras and elsewhere — that this is an ongoing problem that has yet to be resolved?

Well, the first thing that needs to be done is to stop the denial. We need to recognize that there's a problem. And the idea that we want to keep from acknowledging that homosexual activity in seminaries or in the priesthood might be related to these kind of harms is really an important first step. The impulse that we don't want to say anything that might stigmatize homosexual persons is an understandable one. But it has to be weighed against the potential for greater harm for these victims. How many times do we want to go around this block again and keep denying what is becoming increasingly obvious, and taking steps to address it?

I do not know exactly what steps should be taken in seminaries. I'm sure there are people that have much better ideas than I would about that, but the first step I would recommend is to investigate thoroughly what seminaries, what professors, what persons, were complicit in promoting this kind of activity, because we don't know.

The John Jay Report let us know what diocese each offender was in, but did not let us know what seminary each offender had attended. Now, if we need just that piece of information, we could correlate abuse in the seminaries and find out which seminaries graduated priests that were engaged in less abuse; it seems to me that would be an important piece of information to know. And then we can begin to look at what the characteristics of those seminaries were; we might find that it's related to particular professors and particular groups of persons, many of whom are still in the priesthood and still with us. It'd be great to know what the continuing effects of that activity are, but also to be able to identify places where it may still be going on.

This report is being released just ahead of the U.S. bishops' fall assembly, where they will be discussing issues related to the McCarrick scandal and other aspects of clergy sexual abuse. Is it your hope that the report's findings will assist the bishops in better understanding the factors in play regarding clergy sexual abuse and in drafting new policies that can deal with them more effectively?

I certainly hope that that will be the case. But not just the bishops. Any actor of goodwill that works to relieve the Church of this crime that is so harmful to our children, to our young people, is someone that I would like to help. And I hope that the information in this report is helpful to them from any point of view. If the bishops have a will and a mind to seriously address this issue, then I hope it's helpful to them. But what we're finding out is that if the bishops aren't going to clean house, others are. We now have a federal investigation into some Catholic dioceses, and we're likely to have many more. And I have to say that I welcome that.

Like most Catholics today, the credibility of our bishops, to me, is in question on this issue. I hate to say that. I love the Church. I love my bishops. I think my own bishop, Cardinal [Donald] Wuerl, has been maliciously and unfairly characterized, and he's done a lot better job on this issue than is generally known. But I think that, generally speaking, the bishops, as a group, cannot be trusted to solve this problem at this point, and that other folks, I think, might be more reliable and more clear about what to do.

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