THE FALLEN PRIESTS

This is the final and most disturbing installment of The Times' three-part series on the tragedy of pedophilia in the priesthood. To date the focus of the series has been Gilbert Gauthie, who has admitted under oath to molesting at least 30 young men. In the Church, this man is not expected until the fall and related civil damages claims have yet to be resolved.

The fact that Gilbert Gauthie was not the only case of a sexual molestation of boys is the subject of this week's report. Other priests in Acadia—across the nation—have been involved in the sexual abuse of children. The decision to publish our findings about as yet unnamed Acadian priests has been a difficult one, subject to much soul-searching. Ultimately it is a decision grounded in the hope that victims of such abuse will be afforded the help and compassion they deserve by an informed public and that the Church can make peace with itself and its parishioners.

Several months ago Lafayette attorney J. Minos Simon sought sensitive information from Church files on 27 priests whose alleged homosexual behavior, he claimed, bore on his clients' case against the Church in the Gauthie matter. Although the document containing the list has been public record since it was filed in court, the news media, including The Times, have held back reporting the names of the priests on Simon's list. The concern has been for the reputations of the men whose names appear on that list, reputations that might be tarnished unfairly. On the other hand, we asked ourselves, don't parents have a right to know if their children have been exposed to the risk of childhood sexual abuse? Even if Simon's allegations of homosexuality are true, what is the link between homosexuality and pedophilia?

The Archdiocese of New Orleans in the Gauthie case ruled that the Church must divulge information about those priests on Simon's list implicated in the sexual abuse of children but need not respond to questions about homosexuality among Lafayette diocesan priests. However, the Church's insurance companies' oral agreement to accept financial liability in the pending Gauthie civil case apparently renders Judge Ware's decision moot. Simon's right to discovery ends once the Church has stipulated to liability. But Simon says he will appeal Judge Ware's limits on his discovery if the agreement is not signed this week.

Simon's request for information on homosexual priests appears to imply a connection between homosexuality and pedophilia, that is, the proclivity for the sexual abuse of children. Experts on pedophilia dispute such a linkage. In fact, most male pedophiles molest young girls.

What Simon and other attorneys representing Gauthie's victims actually seem to be claiming is an indirect link—that tolerance of homosexual activity in the seminary and among priests in the 1970s created a climate of leniency that allowed Gauthie to continue to perpetrate his crimes without swift and decisive action by Church authorities.

The question of homosexual conduct among Catholic clergy is complicated business. Since the time of St. Paul, Church teachings have condemned homosexuality. In 1976, however, the Vatican issued a pastoral letter offering some hope to gay Catholics.

The letter read in part: "Some persons find themselves, through no fault of their own, to have a homosexual orientation. Homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their persons. They should have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community. Homosexual activity, however, as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong.'"

This recognition of a gay Catholic community, both among laymen and clergy, is evinced by Fr. Robert Nugent, who pioneered the New Ways Ministry in Washington, D.C., a national apostolate reaching out to gay Catholics. Nugent has written: "Few people challenge the assumption that the percentage of gay clergy and male religious is somewhat higher than that of the population at large. The reasons for this are not always clear."

The percentage of homosexuals in American society is believed to be about 10 percent.

Nugent recently told a reporter for The Dallas Morning News, "There are no statistics about how many applicants for seminaries are gay. I have heard anywhere from 20 to 50 percent, but nobody has any statistics to back that up. There is a concern among bishops and the leaders of seminaries about this increase in the number of gay people applying for seminaries. It does present a problem to the Church. The image of the Church is involved. People's confidence in the Church is involved."

In his own research Times reporter Jason Berry found a consensus of people, lay and clergy, who believe the seminaries are a major part of the problem. There is a widespread assumption that active gay sex is tolerated in some seminaries and the priesthood," Berry says.

Attorney Simon's discovery motion implies that the Church is liable for Gauthie's actions because tolerance of other Church-condemned behavior created a "risk" that other condemned behaviors would be tolerated. "The sexual conduct of priests, that is the risk creating factor," Simon has charged, adding that the diocese "failed to create a safeguard and let [molestation] proceed with full knowledge."

Although Simon's questions appear far-ranging he is, after all, an attorney representing a client. Assuming the Church and its insurers proceed to stipulate to liability and that victims' families remain recalcitrant to come forward to attack the Church, these far-ranging questions could die this week in an Abbeville courtroom.

Because of its deep-seated conviction that the public has a right to know the breadth and depth of the tragedy before it, The Times has decided to report its investigation of the 27 priests named in Simon's discovery motion. Our reporter found allegations of homosexuality in cases of 16 of the priests on the list and an additional three whose names did not appear. Nevertheless, in keeping with Judge Ware's logic and expert opinion we chose not to report the names of those priests alleged to have had homosexual relations with consenting adults. That is a matter for the Church and individual conscience.

But for those priests about whom sources reveal pedophilic activities, the rights of parents to know far outweighs other considerations.

A PERSPECTIVE

As a final coda to this investigation, the editors asked reporter Berry for his personal reflections on what he has learned. Says he:

"As a Catholic, I found this work painful and in many ways repugnant. I could never stop thinking about those children. Before full reporting began I met with a priest, a long-time friend, and outlined what I knew then. 'Write it,' he said. 'In the long run the Church and society will profit by it. These things must not be covered up.' I must confess to a divided heart. The Catholic in me recoils from what I have learned about homosexual priests—because of the hypocrisy with respect to celibacy and certain things told to me that would shock even the most jaded."

"How many tragedies, written in Latin, lie in musty vaults or have gone to the graves of bishops with scandals hidden in their heads? Four months ago, I've never dreamed of posing such questions. Now I have no choice but to wonder."

"Nevertheless, my greatest concern is that these articles not give rise to a witch hunt mentality of vicious rumors or mean suspicions. To me the final measure of Church morality is that priests and nuns were willing to speak to me. Many felt great anguish and spoke because their consciences dictated it. In a strange way, the sadness of all this brings one closer to the message of the Gospels—a legacy of love and forgiveness. As a journalist, I have no doubt that the Church has a deeply rooted problem concerning sexuality. As a Catholic, I think finally of that precious word metanoia—from the ancient Greek, meaning a radical conversion of will."

—THE EDITORS

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