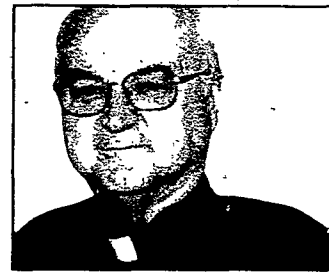


Does celibacy play role in abuse crisis?



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

It has become commonplace nowadays to insist that obligatory celibacy is not the cause of the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood. The recent report of the independent, but episcopally-appointed, National Review Board makes that point.

It may be that there are some uninformed, simplistically minded people out there who have claimed that celibacy is the cause of this terrible scandal and crisis, but I am not aware of a single serious commentator who has made such a claim.

The defenders of celibacy are surely right when they ask, "If celibacy were the cause of the crisis, why haven't the overwhelming majority of celibate priests been sexually involved with children and young people?"

But those same defenders move onto softer ground when they cite the statistic that the total number of priests accused of these crimes and sins of sexual abuse during the timeframe covered by the report represented "only" 4 percent of the active clergy during that time. From there they move almost effortlessly to the conclusion that 96 percent of celibate priests are faithful to their commitment to celibacy.

But this is a fallacy. The fact that at least 4 percent of priests have been accused of abusing children and teenagers does not necessarily mean that the remaining 96 percent are celibate in the full sense of the word.

Such an assumption is at

priests, celibacy either does not work at all or is vulnerable to frequent or occasional compromises.

Again, this is still not to say that obligatory celibacy is the cause of the crisis. Rather, it is a major factor, but not in isolation from the church's official teachings on all aspects of human sexuality nor from the way in which those teachings have been communicated to, and internalized by, clergy, religious and laity alike.

By restricting ordination and the continued exercise of priestly ministry to those willing to commit themselves to lifelong celibacy, the church is forced to draw from an exceedingly narrow slice of its male population for its most important pastoral ministry.

Within that population, there is likely to be a disproportionately higher percentage of sexually dysfunctional or immature individuals than in the general male population, and there is also likely to be a disproportionately higher number of homosexuals, some of whom may have been attracted to the "cover" that a celibate priesthood offers.

One final question: If celibacy has nothing to do with the sexual-abuse crisis, why is it that the scandal has not touched in any significant way the Eastern-rite Catholic churches, which have a married priesthood?

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

MORE LETTERS

communications from and to the diocese, at a crucial time in our continuing growth.

I appreciate your work, and the support of our parish (St. Joseph's Penfield) for the *Catholic Courier*.

Jim Gulley
Brookshire Lane
Penfield

Appreciates statement

To the editor:

I commend you for the column by Bishop Matthew Clark, "What we believe about the Sacrament of Marriage," which I read at www.catholiccourier.com. I found it to be a very clear-headed and straightforward presentation of the Catholic understanding of marriage. When so many tangential arguments regarding same-sex marriage are presented throughout the media, it is very helpful to have a clear statement of Catholic thought to provide a guide. Thank you very much for the article.

John Naginis
Sunburst Street
Lake View Terrace, CA

Research civil laws

To the editor:

The controversy concerning marital rights for the gay community concerns people not only because of individual religious beliefs or faith in the teachings of the Bible but also because of natural law, which is determined by human reason. In marriage a man and woman are able to unite physically as their bodies were designed to fit uniquely together. They also have the awesome power to participate in creation by this physical union. People of the same sex cannot do this. They might be able to write personal contracts that give specific rights to their partners, but this agreement would also need a new name.

The civil rights laws regarding marriage might need to be more clearly defined and their purposes stated. Research into these laws could certainly increase understanding on both sides of this issue.

Janet Schwan
Still Moon Crescent,
Rochester

Letters Policy

The *Catholic Courier* provides space for readers to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the opinions expressed.

Letters must not exceed 300 words. Anonymous letters and the use of pseudonyms are unacceptable. We reserve the right to edit letters for legal and other concerns. With respect to errors in submitted text, we will correct spelling only.

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