

CATHOLIC SEMINARIES: THE INSIDE STORY

I know Roman Catholic seminaries. They have been a big part of my life as student, consultant, professor, and counselor/observer from 1946 to 1984 — 1996 and beyond.

In 1951 as a freshman in college seminary, a gaggle of deacons at St. Paul Seminary disguised me as one of them and took great delight in passing me off in chapel and refectory under the nose of Rector Rudi Bandas, a true scholar and gentleman.¹ Ray Lucker and Mike Mc Donough were part of the ruse. Both were ordained the next year, Ray going on to be Bishop of New Ulm, MN and Mike after many years of admirable pastoral service to the St. Paul Archdiocese left the priesthood to marry. I mourn their loss; they remain in my heart among that large group of dedicated and exemplary priests I have known.

I wish that my vocation had been to write about *The Overlooked Lives of our Noble Priests*² that others have recorded.

My vocation has propelled me to investigate and comment on the darker side of seminary life and its aftermath. I started out innocently enough by asking the simple question, “What is celibacy?” I thought the answer could be easily found. It has taken me a lifetime to realize that priests (bishops and cardinals too) do not generally know the answer. Certainly priests are not—I repeat they are not—taught celibacy in seminaries. Mine is not a minority opinion.

THE SEX ABUSE CRISIS is a symptom of a sick seminary system.

The 2011 John-Jay Report on the *Context and Causes* of clergy sexual abuse in the United States, for all its limitations, got it right when it wrote: “weak seminary formation that neglected to adequately address issues of emotional maturity and sexual identity, contributed to a sharp rise in clergy sexual abuse.”

Charles Gallagher, a Catholic layman in the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, headed the team conducting the first Grand Jury investigation on clergy abuse in that jurisdiction³. Gallagher commented to *Newsworks* (5/19/11) that he

¹ This Minnesota boy studied classics before entering the Saint Paul Seminary. He was ordained 1921. He pursued studies at Cambridge, Oxford, Rome and Louvain. 1925, before he returning to He began teaching at Saint Paul in the seminary in 1925. He authored *The Master Idea of Saint Paul's Epistles; Contemporary Philosophy and Thomistic Principles; Biblical Questions*; in and *Modern Questions* in. During his years as professor theology he organized the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine throughout the archdiocese and founded the Catholic Youth Centers in Saint Paul and Minneapolis; he served as rector of the seminary from 1945 until 1957.

² Eugene Cullen Kennedy. **National Catholic Reporter**. November 18, 2010.

³ **REPORT OF THE GRAND JURY**, September 19, 2005.

thought John-Jay blaming cultural influences was a “bizarre conclusion.” He was more practical and said it's time for the Church to come clean about the real causes of the abuse crisis: "They didn't properly screen these men that became priests, they were not properly supervised and disciplined and were not properly turned over to law enforcement for breaking the law."

Roman Catholic priests are not alone in being inadequately trained in sexuality. The *Religious Institute* an organization representing many traditions conducted a study that “found that most seminarians and clergy in the United States have not been adequately prepared to deal with sexual attractions, to recognize appropriate boundaries and power dynamics, or to assure that their congregations are free of abuse, harassment, and misconduct”⁴.

ALCOHOL ABUSE and SEXUAL MISBEHAVIOR have been chronic problems.

Problems with seminarians are not new. **Time** magazine carried a story in 1965 about a research project about priests conducted by Dr. Robert J. McAllister, a consultant to Catholic University. “Reporting on 100 hospitalized Catholic priests at the Seton Institute, (he) pointed out that 77 had serious emotional problems as seminarians; 32 ultimately became alcoholics.” McAllister added that a conflict between their desire for perfection and their basic needs and desires can drive men to leave the priesthood entirely: "Suddenly their own humanity breaks through and they are gone" ⁵.

Concern about seminaries is not new. A **1961 Vatican** document directed to all seminary rectors and religious houses in the world laid out guidelines for the admission of candidates for vows and major orders⁶. Although concerned with many issues the Vatican demonstrates a long-standing preoccupation with homosexuality as a cause of clergy sexual malfeasance. Indeed Roman Catholic clergy have a wide variety of sexual concerns, but it would be irresponsible to name homosexual orientation as the root of all clergy acting out. The document, however, stressed that men with homosexual orientation are not eligible for a place in seminary or religious life.

The Vatican’s concern with homosexuality generally, and specifically with its place within the ranks of the clergy, evidences massive reaction formation—that is a “*psychological defense mechanism by which an objectionable impulse is expressed in an opposite or contrasting behavior.*”(*The International Psychoanalytical Dictionary*. "Reaction-formation" refers to an attitude or a character-trait that responds to an

⁴ *Sex in the Seminary: Preparing Ministers for Sexual Health and Justice*, 2010.

⁵ **TIME** magazine. April 2, 1965.

⁶ *Religiosorum institutio* Instruction on the Careful Selection and Training of Candidates for States of Perfection and Sacred Orders. Feb. 2, 1961

unconscious (repressed) wish or desire by evoking the opposite of such a desire. For example, generosity covers or conceals avariciousness and hoarding; modesty may replace megalomania; kindness or reluctance to engage in conflict can mask sadistic tendencies. Reaction-formation is thus also a symptom of a psychic conflict and a defense against instinctive reactions.)

This is also related to what therapists have identified with sexually abusing priests as *altruism in the service of narcissism*.

Despite warnings and condemnations of homosexuality the Roman Catholic Church remains a **homosocial** organization (it reserves all power to men and excludes women). This structure naturally facilitates and encourages homosexual activity within its clergy from the top down mostly among the immature and developing candidates. As one psychiatrist put it in a folksy phrase: Men are loving animals and they are going to love whoever's near." In the judgment of some the priesthood in the United States is becoming a "gay profession" (meaning more than 50%).⁷ This is not merely a result of the structural predisposition, but due to the predominance of gay oriented bishops, religious superiors, and rectors of seminaries—those in charge of church power.

In 2002 the Vatican instituted an Apostolic Visitation of 200 U.S. seminaries and houses of formation; the investigations were conducted in 2005 and 2006 and the report was published in English on January 12, 2009. The *Catholic News Service* reported that the 2002 series of revelations of priest sexual abuse in the *Boston Globe* sparked the church visitation.⁸ Those stories served as the flash point of the sexual abuse crisis that hit the United States.

One conclusion of the Vatican's report was, "seminaries appeared to have made improvements in the area of seminarian morality, most notably with regard to homosexual behavior." The examiners attributed this in part to the more judicious selection of seminary rectors. Later the report admitted, "Of course, here and there some case or other of immorality -- again, usually homosexual behavior -- continues to show up. However, in the main, the superiors now deal with these issues promptly and appropriately."

Some who had intimate knowledge about the Vatican investigation said that it was "corrupt." That sordid story will be told at a future date.

Of the several dozens of seminary Rectors I have known personally over the past half century many were exemplary; one became a cardinal, two were named bishops, three left the priesthood to marry, three were elected abbots, however, several were homosexually active even with students; as many were sexually active with women for whom they served as confessors.

⁷ Cf. Donald Cozzens. *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. 2002

⁸ January 14, 2009

Seminary faculties as a group are not celibately observant. At any one time one-third are variously sexually involved in a range of activities.

The tendency of seminary confessors is toward leniency and tolerance of behaviors (including mutual masturbation) that they tend to judge as phases of development toward psychosexual maturity. This rarely ripens into either sexual or celibate understanding and commitment.

One priest, later jailed for sexual involvement with a minor student, was encouraged by his confessor while in the seminary to have a sexual friendship with a priest in order to develop his social skills. That seminarian, once ordained, repeated with the minor the identical behavior he learned under the priest's tutelage.

Confessors, often because of their own unconsolidated celibate identity, tend to encourage sexual acting out by less than conscious motivation. Subtle and subversive grooming of seminarians under the guise of spirituality conditions the young students to be future friends and partners. A seminary professor who served as a confidant successfully propositioned a newly ordained priest who had been his student. After the sexual encounter the teacher said, "I have waited five years for this."

The range of rationalizations used to justify sexual activity under the cover of celibacy seems endless: "priests are human; sex is permitted if you don't get emotionally involved; it's only a sin; it's O.K. as long as you don't leave the priesthood; take her as your housekeeper and God will understand if you fall from time to time; it's natural (even in cases of homosexual acts); I deserve it," and so forth.

A moral theologian in a large seminary advised his students in class: 'if you *must* have sex, be sure to go out side of your parish to where you are not known; do not wear your collar or show any evidence that you are a priest; and don't get married.' The object is to avoid scandal. Is there any better way to teach sociopathy?

A 1956 letter from Dr. Frank Braceland to a bishop spotlights the process. Braceland, a devote Catholic was the medical director of the Institute of Living, and a consultant to many members of the hierarchy. One of many seminarians sent to the hospital for evaluation was typical; he was involved in sexual activity with a fellow student. Braceland said that the man should be dismissed since after ordination this behavior could devolve into sex with minors. And so it does.

So few faculty and confessors are celibately mature that formation that looks good in policy brochures rarely takes place.

Fr. Marcial Degollado Maciel, L.C. authored a book in 1992: ***Integral Formation of Catholic Priests***. It says some beautiful and sound things. Cardinals Bevilacqua and Pio Laghi praised it enthusiastically. Donald Wuerl, currently Cardinal Archbishop of Washington, D.C. wrote the preface, “with gratitude for your gracious invitation to be associated with this publication of so positive a contribution to priestly formation today.”

Maciel had status and credibility as an intimate of Pope John Paul II and because he founded the highly successful religious congregation, the Legion of Christ. He was also sexually active with a number of his students and fathered children with at least two women with whom he maintained a family status⁹.

Cardinal Hans Herman Groer (1919-2003) archbishop of Vienna Austria was forced to resign in 1995 when several men came forward and reported his sexual abuse during the time he was Prefect of Studies (1946-52) at a minor seminary.

Maciel and Groer remained in good standing with the Pope despite credible complaints of malfeasance. John Paul II was a champion of celibacy and declared that it was an immutable law that even he was unable to abrogate. Where does the separation between words and deeds begin and end?

The clerical culture favors sociopaths—men whose words and deeds are not connected. Vatican experts have written that it is easier to get promoted saying the right things (even employing sexual tactics) than being righteous.¹⁰

Gregory Aymond, archbishop of New Orleans addressed a Vatican Congregation on the requirements for accreditation of seminary programs¹¹. He counseled that training programs should assist the ongoing growth of candidates toward a healthy sexuality from the beginning “as a foundation for celibate chastity.”

He also had sage advice for the faculty who “should be educated about how to develop a mature, integrated sexuality” again as a foundation for celibate chastity. Students in formation “must be encouraged to identify and address challenges in maintaining celibate chastity and healthy intimate relationships.” Seminarians who sexually abuse a minor should be dismissed from the program and if one is unable to maintain appropriate boundaries with minors, despite

⁹ Cf. Jason Berry. *Vows of Silence*, 2004; *Render Unto Rome*, 2011.

¹⁰ ***Gone with the Wind in the Vatican (Italian: [Fumo di Santana in Vaticano]: Via col Vento in Vaticano)*** was published in 1999, about nepotism, homosexual scandals, corruption, and exploitation within Vatican City. The 5 anonymous authors who worked inside the Vatican used the pseudonym *I Millenari*.

¹¹ Plenary of the Congregation for Catholic Education (for Seminaries and Religious Institutes of Study) Vatican City, 7 February 2011.

guidelines and instruction, “he cannot be permitted to continue in formation.”

We have heard all the words before. What about the practice, faculty and students?

One counselor was perplexed by a seminarian finishing his final year of theology. His confessor was well aware of the student’s tendency to get involved sexually whenever he was on a break from the seminary. The partner could be a casual acquaintance in a bar or a prostitute from an Adult Bookstore. For example, on his way back to seminary a taxi stopped by him and the driver propositioned him for his passenger in the back of the cab; he accepted. His confessor did not see this as sufficient reason for postponing or even questioning ordination. His reasoning seemed that, although sinful, the partners were all age appropriate and his behavior did not threatening marriage therefore his celibacy could remain in tact.

Celibacy is neither well taught nor well observed by Catholic clergy.

SEMINARIANS ARE UNPREPARED FOR PASTORAL CARE.

Despite all the words from the USCCB¹² and the Vatican (or Fr. Maciel) about the Formation of Clergy, and the relatively positive reading the Vatican visitation gave U.S. seminaries the clerical culture remains destructive. It is elitist and narcissistic. Seminaries are dysfunctional. A sufficient number of the faculty is immersed in the clerical culture to dominate and perpetuate the *total institution*.

Our evaluation of Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States is less sanguine than that of the Vatican. The crisis of sexual abuse of minors starts in the seminary with the prospect of contamination by the clerical culture that creates a world of imaginary superiority and importance.

The specter of Trent still hangs heavy over the modern priest who is tempted to believe its Catechism: *Bishops and priests being, as they are, God’s interpreters and ambassadors, empowered in His name to teach mankind the divine law and the rules of conduct, and holding, as they do, His place on earth, it is evident that no nobler function than theirs can be imagined. Justly, therefore, are they called not only angels, but even gods, because of the fact that they exercise in our midst the power and prerogatives of the immortal God.*

Some strong characters who enter seminaries emerge relatively unscathed. Most have scars. The sociopaths will prosper.

My conclusion from the inside: Not more than one in 20 seminarians ordained today is equipped to hear Confessions or counsel penitents or parishioners.

¹² *Program of Priestly Formation* Fifth Edition. 2006.

Not one in 10 seminarians ordained today is qualified to preach.

Priests coming out of Roman Catholic seminaries are dangerous to others and themselves. Most men, regardless of age, are immature when they enter the seminary and most emerge psychosexually immature or even twisted. Sexuality is only part of the problem. The institutions favor egocentric men. One active priest fears that seminaries are producing “a generation of seminarians and young priests who are cognitively rigid and *risk adverse*; who want to circle the wagons around their imagined secure and superior group; who seem preoccupied with clothing, titles, perks, and externals of religion; and frankly have little use for the world beyond their own control or explanation.¹³”

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¹³ Richard Rohr. *Falling Upward*. P.42.