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Jeffrey A. Nelson

Kent State University - Trumbull Campus, janelson@kent.edu

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***Sex Abuse in the American Catholic Church
and the Attempt at Redemption***

Jeffrey A. Nelson

Associate Professor

janelson@kent.edu

Department of Communication Studies

Kent State University Trumbull Campus

Warren, OH

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the apologia of Catholic leaders as they responded to accusations that surfaced in 2002 regarding priestly sex abuse in the United States. A study of the apologetic techniques used is offered, noting particularly bolstering, transcendence, and differentiation. Though it was Catholic leaders themselves who used the differentiation approach in their apologia, in their reaction to that rhetoric the audience members may have been influenced by the media and/or the leaders' peers. Thus, rhetorical efforts by those two sources also are studied. The investigation concentrates primarily on the four-month period beginning January 9 when coverage was most intense, with some attention devoted to the remaining months of 2002.

Few if any traumas in the history of the American Catholic Church have unsettled that institution as severely as the widespread accusations of priestly sex abuse which began seizing significant media attention early in 2002 and still receive notice at the time of this writing. In referring to the situation Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton of Detroit remarked: "I don't know of anything that has affected the whole church so much in the United States" (quoted in Bruni, 2002, p. A1), the bishop's statement being echoed by William Donohue, president of the Catholic League, who in looking at traumas in the church's U.S. history noted: "There is nothing that would rival this" (quoted in Bruni, p. A1). John R. Quinn, retired archbishop of San Francisco, made his assessment even more dramatic: "In terms of its harm and far-reaching effects, the present crisis in the Church must be compared with the Reformation and the French Revolution" (quoted in Wilkes, 2002, p. 52).

It seems likely that not just Catholics but other Americans paid attention to the sex-abuse scandal as it unfolded. After all, the Catholic Church represents by far the country's largest religious organization and its leaders, the bishops, have enormous influence in the economic, social, and political arenas as well as the religious sphere. The newsworthiness of the scandal came clear in part due to its coverage in the *New York Times*. Once the story broke on January 9, for the first 100 days the *Times* devoted 225 separate pieces, including reports and commentary, to the matter. During that interval the story appeared on the front page on 26 occasions.¹ In fact, any U.S. resident with even a modest interest in keeping abreast of the nation's news--through

newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and/or the internet--would have been hard pressed not to have an understanding of the crisis in the church.

The drama of the scandal became even more intense because most of the priests being investigated stood accused of more than breaking their vows of celibacy by having sexual relations with another person. They were charged with sexually molesting boys and girls, individuals under 18 years of age. First of all they violated the law due to the fact that most states have statutes forbidding adults to have sex with youths, but possibly even worse they became societal pariahs in many cases because of the American people's attitude that child molesters represent some of the most evil and despicable of all human beings (Kluger, 2002; Sullivan, 2002). Catholic bishops played a central role in the scandal--in numerous instances they evidently had known of specific priests preying on youths but had done little if anything to stop those priests from remaining around youngsters and doing further harm. In many cases, priests were simply transferred to another parish, free to molest again and again.

For this scenario Catholic leaders felt obligated to go beyond defending standard church policy, as they frequently were called on to do. These were very personal charges being made "upon a person's character, upon his worth as a human being" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 274). Church leaders realized that "the questioning of a man's *moral character, motives, or reputation* is qualitatively different from the challenging of his policies." In such a circumstance only "the most personal of responses by the accused," a personal "speech of self-defense," holds a chance of satisfying the public (Ware & Linkugel, p. 274). The apologia offered by the Catholic leadership forms the basis for this study.

Apologia and Human Redemption

Ware and Linkugel (1973) in their seminal work on apologia remark about the continuing importance of apologetic discourse for major public figures who look to have committed serious wrongs as viewed by the people. In December of 2002, for example, United States Senator Trent Lott stood as a high-profile official resorting to apologia, following his statement that he believed the nation would have been better off if Strom Thurmond had won the presidency in 1948. The fact that Thurmond at the time was an ardent segregationist made Lott's statement offensive to many, and Lott's failed effort at self-defense caused him to lose his position as Republican leader of the Senate (Purdum, 2002).

Four factors commonly employed in apologetic discourse, as labeled by Ware and Linkugel (1973), include: (a) denial--denying that the alleged action took place; (b) bolstering--identifying with something viewed favorably by audience members; (c) differentiation--causing the listeners to see the act in a new and different manner; and (d) transcendence--entreating the audience to look at the activity from a broad, open-minded, tolerant perspective. In utilizing either of the first two approaches, denial or bolstering, speakers do not endeavor to recast the audience's meaning for the cognitive elements involved in the episode; such a scheme has been termed "reformative." With a "transformative" scheme, however, employing either

differentiation or transcendence, speakers do aim to revise the listeners' conceptions of the episodic elements (Ware & Linkugel, p. 281). Critics have determined that persons speaking in defense of their character generally rely on two factors, one reformatory and the other transformative. This type of procedure seems reasonable due to the fact that an apologist would likely want to alter the meaning of some cognitive elements, but not all, in the audience members' minds (Nelson, 1984; Ware & Linkugel, 1973).

Nelson (1984) suggests that in order to gain a full view of the complete rhetorical event, analysts of contemporary apologia ought to consider not just the apologist but also her/his peers and the media. Peers and the media can have a significant impact on how the public perceives the principal's defense. Nelson notes further that in order to aid the defendant, peers and the media do not need to employ the same two apologetic factors utilized by the defendant. That is, as long as varying strategies do not contradict one another, they can work together to the principal's advantage.

Of course, if guilty acts have been performed and an apologist claims not to be responsible for them, it would help the apologist to find some other(s) to blame. As Burke (1984) notes, once guilt has been discovered, humans look for a way for it to be purged so redemption can come. Through "mortification" (Burke, 1969, p. 266) a rhetor pronounces her/himself the guilty party so healing may begin. On the other hand, a rhetor may also begin the healing process through "victimage" (Burke, 1984, p. 284), or transferring the guilt to another agent. The latter path is the one more often preferred because it is usually the more personally satisfying. Normally an individual desires to "battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within. And the greater one's internal inadequacies the greater amount of evils one can load up on the back of the 'enemy'" (Burke, 1957, p. 174).

Bolstering-Transcendence

In early 2002 the *New York Times* along with dozens of other American daily newspapers began regularly printing accounts of individuals who claimed that, as children, they had been sexually molested by Catholic priests. The first cleric under the spotlight, the Rev. John Geoghan of Boston, faced a number of criminal charges and at least 84 civil lawsuits ("New Policy," 2002). Quickly the story grew and within a short time it was determined that hundreds of priests throughout the country stood accused of sexually abusing youths. Not just priests but bishops came under attack, for it was the bishops, the leaders of the American Catholic Church, who in many instances had allegedly contributed to the scandal by not reporting accusations of molestation to civil authorities and by allowing the named priests to continue working with children, often in a new parish.

In offering their apologia the bishops worked to bolster themselves by showing their equality with all other human beings—the episcopal leaders acknowledged the serious wrongs they had committed. For instance, Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York City stated: "For this [priestly scandal] we are deeply sorry for the harm done to our most precious resource, our

children” (quoted in Wakin, 2002, p. B8). From Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, came the pronouncement: “We continue to apologize to the victims, and to their parents and their loved ones for this failure” (quoted in “Bishops Issue,” 2002, p. A15). “As a pastor,” Bishop Frank J. Rodimer of Paterson, New Jersey remarked, “I regret my own inadequacy,” continuing, “I deeply regret that I did not know 20 years ago what our society has come to know about such matters as pedophilia. . . . I might have helped to prevent or eliminate some of this suffering” (quoted in Jones, 2002, p. B5). A statement of Denver’s Archbishop Charles J. Chaput included this declaration:

The headlines have reminded us that sin isn’t just something outside the church. It can also live in the actions of her pastors and shepherds. Nothing can diminish the suffering of the victims of sexual misconduct in the church or explain away the seriousness of the sin, especially when committed against a child.

This is a source of huge sorrow and regret for me personally and for anyone in leadership in the church. No apology is adequate, but I do apologize sincerely and humbly on behalf of myself and our priests. (quoted in “Remarks From,” 2002, p. A19)

The American bishops in their bolstering statements, exemplified above, did not try to alter the reality perceived by Catholics and other Americans but they did work to show that they, like truly decent people everywhere, cared deeply for the welfare of children. Also, just as truly decent people would do, the bishops expressed genuine regret for serious wrongs they had carried out, with an obvious commitment to insuring that the sins were not repeated.

Besides bolstering, Catholic leaders employed transcendence as an apologetic factor in attempting to influence the audience. They tried to get listeners to view the priestly scandal from a wide-ranging perspective, one which pointed up the good that the church does for humanity. They tried to “psychologically move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of . . . character,” creating a “new context in the minds of the audience” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 280).

Thus Boston’s Cardinal Bernard F. Law exclaimed: “When there are problems in the family, you don’t walk away. You work them out together with God’s help” (quoted in “Cardinal Says,” 2002, p. A24), later adding that as “a community wounded by public scandal,” “we fix our gaze with unshakable faith on the risen Lord” (quoted in “Boston Cardinal,” 2002, p. A16). Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland remarked: “It is easy to lose our nerve as the crisis facing the church presses in on us,” reminding his audience that “God became a father most of all to the prodigal son” and “He became the shepherd most of all to the lost sheep” (quoted in Clines, 2002, p. A25). Those people listening to Los Angeles’ Cardinal Roger Mahony heard that in some instances priests “failed to protect the flock, they have acted as wolves,” committing “the most heinous betrayal,” “a grave evil and sin” (quoted in Steinfelds, 2002, p. B7). But, he noted at another time: “though no human plan can possibly foresee all eventualities,” he was doing his best “to make certain that all who minister to God’s people in this archdiocese do so with personal integrity, trustworthiness, and zeal--all the qualities of the Good Shepherd” so that the faithful could have a renewed confidence in the church (quoted in Whitaker, 2002, p. A20).

Catholics, then, according to statements like the above from their leaders, could look beyond the existing crisis to a Christian institution that truly cared for them.

Differentiation

If bolstering-transcendence represented a type of apologia used frequently by Catholic leaders in response to the priestly scandal, another type also gained favor in some prominent quarters: bolstering--differentiation. This second approach followed the same line as the first in regard to bolstering--church leaders had seriously erred, they were truly sorry for their transgressions, and those kinds of transgressions would not occur again. However, in the last half of the duality differentiation replaced transcendence. Differentiation “subsumes those strategies which serve the purpose of separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute.” With this procedure “the division of the old context into two or more new constructions of reality is accompanied by a change in the audience’s meanings” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278).

The division on which numerous Catholic leaders focused was a heterosexual-homosexual one. If they did not always state it explicitly, they strongly implied that homosexual priests for the most part had brought about the sexual scandal in the church, that if these persons were rooted out from the priesthood the church would stand in much better condition. Because the leaders who employed this strategy were supposedly heterosexual, they had no need to blame themselves. Gay priests served as the scapegoats who had to be sacrificed if redemption was to occur.² That homosexuals would be accused should not seem surprising in light of the church’s official teaching: “Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (“Pastoral Care,” 1986, p. 379). Moreover, Pope John Paul II had in recent times expressed his attitude on homosexuality with a comment he made regarding a gay pride celebration in Rome in 2000. “In the name of the Church of Rome I cannot but express my bitterness at the insult to the Great [Catholic] Jubilee of 2000,” the pontiff said, “and the offense to the Christian values of a city which is so dear to the hearts of all Catholics in the world” (quoted in Glassman, 2000, p. 4). The Vatican had also raised objections to American ministries deemed to be too conciliatory toward homosexuals (Gallagher, 1999; Malcolm, 1998).

Though it was Catholic leaders themselves who used the differentiation approach in their apologia, in their reaction to that apologia audience members may have been influenced by the media and/or the leaders’ peers. Thus, before focusing on the leaders’ differentiation efforts, this section offers an analysis of related rhetoric coming from the media and peers.

Media

A casual observer might find some credence to the claims against gay priests. The media coverage of the sex scandal concentrated much more on the molestation of boys than girls. In fact, a *New York Times* reader who followed the story for 100 days after it broke would have found 98 reports or commentaries specifically referencing attacks on boys but just 17 referring to girls.³ A major article on the crisis in *Time* magazine (McGeary, 2002) emphasized the abuse of boys not only in the writing but in the photographs of victims accompanying the text, all five of which showed male youths. The heavy stress on young-male molestation, displayed in text as well as photos, continued in other popular newsmagazines (e.g., Cannon, 2002; B. Hewitt, 2002; Miller & France, 2002). Nor did the emphasis on boys by the media mislead the audience—respected sources claimed that at least 80% of the abuse victims were male (Dreher, 2002; France, 2002; Leo, 2002).

In case audience members did not grasp the potential homosexual connection to the church's crisis, media sources through their use of language alluded to such a tie. For instance, in the 100-day period noted above, reference to the words "homosexual" or "gay" appeared in 26 separate *New York Times* pieces on the scandal.⁴ The media also did not shy from labeling specific accused priests as homosexual. Readers could learn, for example, of Father Neil Conway who "has come to know that he is gay" (France, 2002, p. 56); an anonymous priest who claimed "I think I knew I was homosexual" ("Confession of," 2002, p. 34); Father Paul B. Shanley, a gay-rights advocate "cited in a gay publication's coverage of a Boston man-boy-love conference" (Cannon, 2002, p. 49); and Father Edward A. Pipala who "said he needed help because of his homosexuality" (Weiser & Wakin, 2002, p. B4).

The media, then, though for the most part not naming gays as the source of the priestly scandal, certainly developed a scene which could lend support to an apologist adopting a differentiation scheme for the occasion, one who takes a single rendition of reality and breaks it up into two or more renditions, thus providing an audience justification for changing its interpretation of the situation under consideration (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). The media took a single priesthood and divided it into a two-pronged order: one encompassing a standard, presumably heterosexual group and the other including a significant cluster of homosexuals some of whom sexually molested youths.

Peers

Though clergy and lay Catholics not in leadership positions in the church do not own the same institutional power that bishops and other officials do, the faithful can sometimes regard their communications as important. While not equals in the bureaucratic sense, certain of these individuals may be considered the officials' peers because of the influence they wield. And if peers have prestige in the eyes of the targeted audience, through their rhetoric they can go a long way in strengthening or undermining an apologist's claims.

A number of Catholic spokespersons alluded to a relationship between the allegedly high percentage of gay priests and the crisis faced by the church. They spoke, first of all, to “what every credible study has shown, that gays are far more prevalent in the priesthood than in the population at large” (Keller, 2002, p. A15). Richard Sipe, a laicized priest and psychotherapist, claimed 20 to 30% of priests to be homosexual (Dreher, 2002; Eckstrom, 2002). The Rev. Donald B. Cozzens, a former seminary rector and professor of religious studies at John Carroll University, stated that the percentage could be as high as 50 (Goodstein, 2002). Experts generally agreed on numbers in the 15 to 50% range (Dahir, 2002b; “Gay Dilemma,” 2002, Ripley, 2002). Mark Jordan, professor of religion at Emory University, went so far as to say: “If you, overnight, subtracted the number of gay priests, the church couldn't function the next day” (quoted in Eckstrom, p. 15).

The purported great number of gay priests would not by itself serve as evidence that homosexual clerics bore primary responsibility for the eruption of the church scandal. But if the gay clergy seemed more closely connected than other priests with the sexual abuse of youths, then those clergy might serve as a kind of “ritually perfect victim” (Burke, 1984, p. 284) to be offered up for the institution’s redemption, “a sacrificial vessel whose ‘slaying’ will atone for sin” (Lake, 1984, p. 428).

Indeed, a number of prominent observers, if not always directly blaming gay priests, cast strong suspicion on them in wake of the scandal. Jason Berry (2002), author of a book on sexual abuse by priests, remarked:

The same secrecy and shame that hides homosexuality in the church produces an atmosphere that has concealed acts of pedophilia. Just as bishops like Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston tolerated pedophiles in their midst, they have largely failed to reckon with the development of a complex culture of gay priests. One narrow strand of this culture consists of those priests who have molested teenage boys. (p. A19)

He added that the large number of gay priests had fomented a “crisis” within the church (Berry, p. A19). To back himself up he quoted the Rev. Andrew M. Greeley, a prominent Catholic sociologist: “Blatantly active homosexual priests are appointed, transferred and promoted. . . . National networks of active homosexual priests (many of them church administrators) are tolerated. Pedophiles are reassigned” (quoted in Berry, p. A19).

The writer of two best-selling books on Catholicism, Gary Wills, took an even harsher tone than Berry:

What is wrong about gays and lesbians as priests and ministers? Nothing is—as other denominations are realizing when they ordain them. But that does not make the presence of gay “celibates” in the current Catholic priesthood a healthy thing. They may claim that they are “celibate” by their own private definition of the word. But they took a public vow of celibacy, and the aim of any oath is communicative, is a contractual agreement. Both sides of the contract must agree on its terms. Gay priests are living a lie. It may be imposed on them by a senseless rule. Yet they uphold the resulting structure of deceit. People are fooled by them. One reason pedophiles have been given access to children is

that Catholic parents were under the misunderstanding that priests refrain from all sex. In the surveys made of them, the gay priests say they must be careful to keep others from learning of their secret. Every move they make is gradated to keep some people at least in the dark. (quoted in Morrissey, 2002, p. 18)

While himself an Episcopalian, Pennsylvania State University Professor of Religious Studies Philip Jenkins is a respected researcher of the Catholic Church. In his offering up of gay priests as victims for redemption in the church's scandal he tried to show a parallel with the Boy Scouts who also used gays as a sacrificial agent in a recent controversial episode:

The issue of gay priests is very sensitive, and not just for the Catholic Church. It bears on controversies like allowing gay men in the Boy Scouts. I'm sure that most gay scoutmasters would be responsible, and I don't know that gay men are any more likely than heterosexual men to have sex with teenagers. But the experience of the Catholic Church suggests there will be problems if you send gay scoutmasters with teenage boys. (quoted in Tierney, 2002, p. B1)

Even academic authorities known for their supposed support of gays as priests were not averse to placing homosexuals on the sacrificial altar. Thus Father Richard McBrien, widely revered professor of religious studies at the University of Notre Dame, in speaking of the church's crisis expressed his concern on nationwide television about a "gay culture" at American seminaries, a culture that he said may have been driving away heterosexual candidates for the priesthood (D. Hewitt, 2002). Though never defining "gay culture," he went on to declare that what he believed to be the high proportion of gay priests needed to be scaled down dramatically, that heterosexuals should become a significant majority. For McBrien, then, if the church was to be saved, homosexuals needed to be sacrificed so that heterosexuals could regain control of the institution.

The Rev. Cozzens, mentioned earlier, and like McBrien a purported supporter of gays in the priesthood, on a nationally televised show also demonstrated his worry about too many homosexual clerics:

I think we have to ask the question: Why are 90% to 95%, and some estimates say as high as 98%, of the victims of clergy teenage boys? . . . We need to ask that question, and I think there's a certain reluctance to raise that issue. (Fischer, 2002)

Though Cozzens in his interview in no way blamed all gay priests for the church crisis, he did suggest that homosexuals owned guilt in considerable part for that crisis, making them an appropriate sacrificial vessel in the redemptive cycle.

The apologetic strategies employed by Cozzens and many of his colleagues such as those just named encompassed "a particularization of the charge at hand" and placed "whatever it is about him [the accused] that repels the audience into a new perspective" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278). These strategies differentiated clearly between heterosexuals and homosexuals within the Catholic clergy, and because it was mainly the homosexuals who presumably violated sacred hierarchical norms, they were the individuals who needed to be sacrificed if the church's guilt was to be expiated.

Catholic Leaders

But academics and other Catholic spokespersons were not the defendants in the priestly scandal. While a number of them tried in many instances to help redeem the church by offering homosexuals as a compensatory sacrifice, it was the bishops and other Catholic leaders who sustained direct harsh attacks because of their keeping the sex abuse by priests secret for years and in some cases decades, often permitting the offenders to continue in their ministries and to have additional opportunities to molest youths. Typical of the charges against the hierarchy by prominent Catholics were the following. *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd (2002) wrote of “the truly godless cover-up by church officials. A little like some of the institutions of Islam, Rome is in a defenseless crouch, protecting criminals in its midst instead of telling the truth and searching its soul” (p. 15). From Daniel C. Maguire (2002), professor of moral theology at Marquette University, came the complaint: “Like the Enron collapse, the sexual-abuse problem in the Catholic Church reveals not just instances of corruption but a culture of corruption. The corruption lies in the Catholic hierarchy’s established pattern of sacrificing people to institutional image” (p. A14). And *New Republic* senior editor Andrew Sullivan (2002) lamented: “We have learned one single thing . . . the highest officials of the largest Christian denomination on earth have lower standards with regard to the protection of children and minors than secular criminal law does” (p. 31).

Of course, as already shown, Catholic officials through bolstering worked extensively to show their regret for the harmful actions that had occurred. But instead of relying on transcendence for their second apologetic technique, as some authorities had done, at certain stages key church leaders turned to differentiation, emphasizing the difference between supposedly well adjusted heterosexual priests and allegedly maladjusted homosexual clerics. These spokespersons contended that it was the homosexuals who had done most of the harm, it was they who had violated the sacred covenant, and if the church would be purged of them Catholicism could return to normalcy. Gay priests would be offered in atonement for evils committed, allowing absolution to be granted to the institutional church. As previously demonstrated, officials calling for the exclusion of homosexuals from the priesthood had rhetorical help from other individuals within the church who castigated gays, and at least indirectly from the media which reported much more on male-male abuse than male-female.

Indicative of comments made by some Catholic leaders were those of Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, a top Vatican official and formerly archbishop of Denver, who stated that the great majority of documented sex-abuse cases did not represent child abuse in the strict sense since most of the victims were apparently teenage boys, past puberty. He claimed the problem to be mainly homosexual: “I think it’s a misnomer, really, to call [the problem] child abuse. I think it’s more of an acting out homosexually” (quoted in “At Vatican,” 2002, p. 5). Cardinal Adam J. Maida of Detroit reinforced Stafford’s assessment, declaring that behavioral scientists “are telling us . . . it’s not truly a pedophilia-type problem, but a homosexual-type problem,” adding

that the church needed to “look at this homosexual element as it exists, to what extent it is operative in our seminaries and our priesthood and how to address it” (quoted in “At Vatican,” p. 5). Having taken seriously statements like those coming from Stafford and Maida, an observer might easily attach credence to conclusions drawn by officials such as Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estevez, prefect for the Congregation for Divine Worship: ordination “of homosexual men or men with homosexual tendencies is absolutely inadvisable and imprudent, and from the pastoral point of view, very risky” (quoted in “Vatican Official,” 2002, p. A15).

The sex-abuse crisis, regardless of its immediate repercussions for the church, served to demonstrate that homosexuals should not be admitted to holy orders at any time under any circumstance, according to some high-placed spokespersons. Homosexuals always needed to be clearly distinguished from heterosexuals and kept from ordination, according to the Rev. Andrew R. Baker (2002) of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, since a homosexual orientation “is fundamentally flawed in its disordered attraction because it can never ‘image’ God and never contribute to the good of the person or society” (p. 8). An unnamed official, referring to an anticipated Vatican position paper on homosexuality, echoed Baker’s thoughts:

The document’s position is negative, based in part on what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says in its revised edition, that the homosexual orientation is “objectively disordered.” Therefore, independent of any judgment on the homosexual person, a person of this orientation should not be admitted to the seminary and, if it is discovered later, should not be ordained. (quoted in Fuller, 2002, p. 8).

That a candidate for the priesthood had abstained from same-sex activity made no difference, based on this viewpoint, since the individual did not have an allegedly wholesome heterosexual outlook. Philadelphia’s Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua summed up the matter: “a person who is homosexual oriented is not a suitable candidate for the priesthood even if he has never committed any homosexual act” (quoted in Fuller, p. 8).

Another reason gays needed to be differentiated from heterosexuals and purged from the priesthood, in the view of some high-placed sources, was that gays were actually driving heterosexuals away from a healthy priestly vocation. Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, cited earlier, told a news conference that it was a constant struggle to insure that “the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men”; he added that a serious problem arose for the church when there existed in a seminary a “homosexual atmosphere or dynamic that makes heterosexual young men think twice” about entering either because they did not want to be associated with a gay culture or they feared being harassed (quoted in “At Vatican,” 2002, p. 4). The late Cardinal Humberto Medeiros of Boston, in a 1979 letter made public in a 2002 sex-abuse court case, wrote: “Where large numbers of homosexuals are present in a seminary, other homosexuals are quickly attracted. Other healthier young men tend to be repelled” (quoted in “A Cardinal,” 2002, p. 22). The Rev. Baker (2002), also cited earlier, made a point similar to that of Gregory and Medeiros in discussing “the unfortunate experience in some seminaries and dioceses” where “cliques may form based on the disordered attractions” (p. 9). He continued:

These cliques can confuse young heterosexual men in the growth of their understanding of manhood and in developing skills and virtues to live a celibate life, because they can often see modeled in members of these cliques a disordered view of human sexuality and of proper masculine behavior. (p. 9)

It has been established that an apologetic strategy which convinces the audience to develop a new, notably altered outlook on a case can often benefit the accused, and key Catholic leaders were certainly asking those in the audience to revise their perspective on the priesthood. These leaders were asking the Catholic faithful to see two priesthoods, one of which was endangering the church by driving worthy men away, that predatory priesthood needing to be sacrificed for the greater good.

Though many Catholic leaders did not use the apologetic technique of differentiating a homosexual priesthood from a heterosexual one, their failure to reject that approach (Gumbleton, 2002) suggested that they had no serious objection to it and that it therefore had some validity. As Noelle-Neuman (1974) asserts, “the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one” (p. 44). The Catholic hierarchy sent a message to the faithful in the church that homosexuals were different, certainly not in a positive way, that they had done serious harm to the sacred institution during the sex-abuse scandal, and that they needed to be purged from the priesthood so that Catholicism could thrive.

In fact, a wide range of experts who had studied the priest sex-abuse issue did not agree at all with the hierarchy’s conclusions on homosexuals. Interested individuals could read, for example: “Leading psychotherapists . . . caution against making a link between gay priests and abusive priests” (Eckstrom, 2002, p. 15); “Clinical studies prove time and again that being gay is not related to sex abuse” (Dahir, 2002a, p. 35); “Various psychological studies indicate homosexual persons are as healthy as anyone else” (Gumbleton, 2002, p. 13); and “Experts have repeatedly pointed out that the sex abuse in question--pedophilia and ephebophilia--are functions of arrested sexual development, not a particular sexual orientation” (Fuller, 2002, pp. 7-8).

The evidence showing that certain priests, because of their homosexuality, did not bring about the Catholic sex-abuse scandal certainly did not deter the church’s hierarchy from maintaining that gay priests represented an appropriate victim to be offered if the church was to be redeemed. Burke (1957, 1969, 1984) never insists that the representative chosen for punishment must be the one who truly performed evil action. Brummett (1981) summarizes Burke’s attitude on victimage:

This complex and fascinating option requires the guilty to find and punish some person or object which represents their own guilt. Victimage is a poignant resolution to guilt because the goat is punished, not so much for what it has done, but for its ability to represent what the guilty themselves have done. (p. 256)

Homosexuals represented a neat, distinct category of victims to be sacrificed for Catholicism’s redemption. That specific category seemed especially fitting since the church had long labeled such individuals as disordered and tending toward wrong. Moreover, the implication

that Catholic leaders did not form a part of this group allowed them to transfer guilt away. The hierarchy could then defend themselves as not being associated with the cluster that allegedly brought about the priestly sex-abuse crisis. Because they were separate from the abusers, they could not be blamed.

Conclusion

Certainly the rhetoric coming from key sources in reaction to the 2002 discovery of widespread sex abuse by Catholic priests pointed up the great import that must be attached to peers and the media as an agent offers a public apology. Though the media and peers did not generally offer in this case precisely the same message as some prominent church leaders, namely that homosexuals should be kept out of the priesthood, they did create a scene conducive to the rhetorical efforts of those leaders. Peers and the media produced a setting in which gay priests became highly suspect. That no evidence was ever introduced showing homosexual priests as a rule to pose serious danger to youths made little difference. The mood was established for certain church officials to carry the matter further, urging the elimination of gay priests. That mood was enhanced by the church's history of labeling homosexuals as freakish and abnormal, below the level of heterosexuals.

That kind of negative atmosphere for gays also received a boost due to the standard policy on homosexuals in America--they are clearly classified beneath heterosexuals. Thus for example, homosexuals may serve in the armed forces only if they keep their sexual orientation secret so that, according to military authorities, other soldiers' morale is not threatened. In most states homosexuals may not marry, declaring their bond with one another legally to the public as heterosexuals do. And when government bodies enact civil-rights legislation for gays, exceptions in the enforcement of the legislation are frequently allowed for religious bodies that find homosexuality abhorrent.

The general scene then lent itself well to the Catholic leaders' apology, for their offering up of gays as sacrificial vessel in the sex-abuse scandal. The setting provided them as an almost perfect victim. Weakness and an inclination to evil—the traits heaped on church leaders by many Catholics—could conveniently be shifted to gays via the leaders' apologetic strategy.

When agitation arises and the power structure becomes threatened, in order to survive the members of that structure must quickly show to concerned parties "their ability to manage, guide, direct, and enhance" the group they lead, to demonstrate "strength" in perilous times (Bowers & Ochs, 1971, pp. 39-40). Powerful Catholic officials clearly accepted some blame for the sex-abuse scandal, exhibited through their apologetic techniques of bolstering and transcendence. But in order to exhibit strength they relied on differentiation. They declared that if audience members looked at the crisis from a new, different perspective, a very large part of the liability would fall on individuals in a particular sector, and officials displayed their resolve to purge the organization of those individuals so that it could be saved.

The case studied here also highlights the power that scenic elements surrounding an apology may play in its ultimate success or failure. Further, the case suggests the significant power that may be wielded by peers and the media in supporting, or hindering, the apologist. Finally, the role of silence rears its head, as influential individuals who maintain quiet in the face of an apology ironically make a strong statement about it.

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Endnotes

¹ From a review of the *New York Times*, January 9 through April 18, 2002.

² The terms "gay" and "homosexual" are used interchangeably throughout the paper. Some researchers use "gay" to refer to a particular social sensibility among persons with a homosexual orientation. That type of reference is not employed here.

³ From a review of the *New York Times*, January 9 through April 18, 2002.

⁴ From a review of the *New York Times*, January 9 through April 18, 2002.