

This article, the first in a series of 2, was published in **The Tablet** on 4th August 2018, under the title “Homosexuality among the clergy: caught in a trap of dishonesty”.

We’re in for a rough ride

Would it shock you to know that the leading force behind the term “gender ideology” and the campaign against it, was a gay cardinal? Or that a gay priest wrote the official 2005 explanation as to why gay men could not be priests? I learned of the (now dead) Latin American Cardinal’s reputation for violence towards the rentboys he frequented from a socialworker in his home town, and later discovered that this and other outrages were open secrets in both his homeland and Rome. Paris-based Mgr Tony Anatrella was a Vatican expert on homosexuality, one of very few authors the CDF recommended on the subject, alongside Drs Joseph Nicolosi, Gerard van den Aardweg and Aquilino Polaino, gay-cure proponents all. Anatrella had long been reported to have engaged in inappropriate touching with seminarians and others who came to him for help in dealing with their so-called “same-sex attraction”. As recently as this last June, and after many years of shameful ecclesiastical obfuscation in France and Italy, those reports have been found to be credible, and Anatrella has been suspended from public ministry. If it does shock you that such public paragons of homophobia-dressed-as-Christianity might have been “protesting too much”, then prepare yourself for a rough ride over the next few years.

I start with the Latin American and Anatrella, both from outside the English-speaking world, because the accounts of (now former) Cardinal Theodore McCarrick’s wrongdoings, added to those of the late Cardinal Keith O’Brien, might have fooled you into thinking that this is an Anglosphere thing. It isn’t. Similar tales abound across the four language groups with which I am directly familiar. And now that the dominos are starting to fall, both the name and the deeds of the Latin American will surely come into the record soon. The McCarrick shock was not what he got up to with seminarians and other adults. These were widely known about. It was that in addition to a standardly furtive, albeit egregiously creepy, clerical gay life, this generally kind and well-liked man had also abused at least two minors. Such does not seem to have been the case with O’Brien, Anatrella or the Latin American. And in general, despite what those who try to conflate “gay” with “paedophile” would have you believe, a knowing clerical gay milieu is genuinely shocked and baffled when minors are involved.

In all these cases, in as far as the behaviour was adult-related, plenty of people in authority sort-of-knew what was going on, and had known throughout the clerics’ respective careers. However the informal rule among the Catholic Clergy - the last remaining outpost of enforced homosociality in the Western world - is strictly “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Typically, blind eyes are turned to the active sex lives of those clerics who have them, only two things being beyond the pale: whistle-blowing on the sex lives of others, or public suggestions that

the Church's teaching in this area is wrong. These lead to marginalisation, whether formal or informal.

Given all this, it seems to me entirely reasonable that people should now be asking "How deep does this go?" If such careers were the result of blind eyes being turned, legal settlements made, and these clerics themselves were in positions of influence and authority, how much more are we going to learn about those who promoted and protected them? Or about those whom they promoted?

So it is that voices like Rod Dreher - keenly followed blogger at *The American Conservative* - are resuscitating talk of the "Lavender Mafia", and the demand, which became popular in conservative circles from 2002 onwards, that the priesthood be purged of gay men. Investigative journalists are being encouraged to lay bare the informal gay networks of friendship, patronage, and potential for blackmail which structure clerical life (or are being excoriated for their politically correct cowardice in failing to do so). The aim is to weed out the gays, especially the treasonous bishops who have perpetuated the system. Ross Douthat - the *New York Times* columnist - has called for a papally mandated investigation into the American Church (I guess along the lines of Mgr Charles Scicluna's in Chile) in order to restore its moral authority. Others, like Robert Mickens, *The Tablet's* Rome correspondent for many years, are equally aware of the "elephant in the sacristy" which is the massively disproportionate number of gay men in the clergy, but highlight the refusal of the Roman authorities to engage in any kind of publicly accountable, adult discussion about this fact. This reinforces collective dishonesty and perpetuates the psychosexual immaturity of all gay clergy, whether celibate, partnered or practitioners of so-called "serial celibacy".

How to approach this issue in a healthy way? As a gay priest myself I am obviously more in agreement with Mickens than with Dreher or Douthat. However I would like to record my complete sympathy with the passion of the latter two as well as with their rage at a collective clerical dishonesty which renders farcical the claim to be teachers of anything at all, let alone divine truth. Jesus becomes credible through witnesses, not corrupt party-line pontificators.

Having said that, I suspect that particular interventions, whether by civil authority or Papal mandate, are always going to run aground on the fact that they can only deal with, and bring to light specific bad acts, usually ones that rise to the level of criminality. I cannot imagine a one-off legal intervention in this sphere that would be able to make appropriate distinctions where there are so many fine lines: between innocent friendship, sexually charged admiration, abusive sexual suggestion, emotional blackmail, financial blackmail, recognition of genuine talent, genuine love lived platonically, genuine love lived with sexual

intimacy, sexual favours granted with genuine freedom, sexual favours granted out of fear or in exchange for promotion, covering peccadillos for a friend, covering graver matters for a rival in exchange for some benefit, not wanting to know too much about other people's lives, or obsessively wanting to know too much about them. Let alone the usual rancours of break-ups, career disappointments, petty jealousies, bitterness, revenge and so on. All of these tend to shade into or out of each other over time, making effective outside assessment, even if it were desirable, impossible.

I don't think there is a healthy way to address this without slowly opening up understanding of some of the dimensions of the systemic structural trap that is the clerical closet. In a second article I will set out what I hope is a merciful picture of how this trap has arisen, and how it can be, and indeed is beginning to be undone. This with a view to diminishing our scandal and helping all of us adjust to a new ecclesial reality. However, let me here describe some elements of the structure which are going to become more and more visible as time goes by. These will not offer a pretty picture. Our Lord told us that what was whispered in private would be shouted from the rooftops. And so it is: what seemed randomly anecdotal is becoming sociologically evident.

For shorthand I use the word "gay" here to refer to an adult male's stable same-sex orientation, irrespective of how that is accepted or lived out. Also please notice that, for the purpose of these two articles, the issue of a gay cleric's relationship status – single, partnered, widower, serially available - while important for each one personally, is functionally irrelevant for understanding the systemic nature of the clerical closet. A stably partnered and emotionally balanced priest can no more be publicly honest than a deeply tortured one with many partners. And it is very rare that a genuinely celibate gay cleric is allowed to bear witness to their gift in the first person. Not least because if they are genuine livers-out of celibacy as a gift, they are likely to have discovered that it is as a self-accepting gay man that they are so. And this public self-acceptance puts them further into opposition with official teaching than any sexual indiscretion, which can of course be forgiven.

An anecdotal illustration: a few years ago, I found myself leading a retreat for Italian gay priests in Rome. Of the nearly fifty participants some were single, some partnered, for others it was the first time they had ever been able to talk honestly with other priests outside the confessional. Among them there were seven or eight mid-level Vatican officials. I asked one from the Congregation for the Clergy what he made of those attending with their partners. He smiled and said, "Of course, we know that the partnered ones are the healthy ones." Let that sink in. In the clerical closet, dishonesty is functional, honesty is dysfunctional, and the absence or presence of circumspect sexual practice between adult males is irrelevant.

And so to some systemic dimensions of “The elephant in the sacristy”. The first is its size. A far, far greater proportion of the clergy, particularly the senior clergy, is gay than anyone has been allowed to understand, even the bishops and cardinals themselves. Harvard Professor Mark Jordan’s phrase “a honeycomb of closets”, in which each enclosed participant has very little access to the overall picture, is exactly right. But the proportion is going to become more and more self-evident thanks to social media and the generalized expectations of gay honesty and visibility in the civil sphere. This despite many years of bishops resisting accurate sociological clergy surveys. At the time of the last papal election in 2013 we did have hints that the Vatican and the cardinal electors were shocked at discovering from reports commissioned by Benedict how many of them were gay. Part of their shock has to have been their fear at how the faithful would be scandalized if they had any idea. They were right to be afraid, and the faithful *are* going to have an idea as the implosion of the closet accelerates. How scandalized - or how accepting - the faithful will be is going to depend on how well we learn to talk about all this.

A second dimension is grasped when you understand the general rule that the heterosexuality of a cleric is inversely proportional to the stridency of his homophobia. This is one of the reasons why I am sceptical of all attempts to “weed out the gays”. The principal clerical crusaders in this area turn out to be gay themselves - in some cases, so deeply in denial that they don’t know it. And in some cases knowingly so. My own experience, which has since been confirmed by hundreds of echoes worldwide, is that there are proportionately few straight men in the clergy (leaving aside rural dioceses in some countries, where heterosexual concubinage is the customary norm) and they do not, as a rule, persecute gay men. It is closeted men who are the worst persecutors. Some are very sadly disturbed souls who cannot but try to clean outwardly what they cannot admit to being inwardly. These can’t be helped since Church teaching reinforces their hell. For others the lure of upward mobility leads them to strategic displays of enthusiasm for the enforcement of the house rules.

A third dimension is that banning gay men from the seminary never works. In practise, the ban means that those “tempted” by honesty will be weeded out, or will weed themselves out, uncomfortable with the inducements to a double life. Those unconcerned by honesty, and happy to swim in the wake of the double lives of those doing the weeding, will learn how to look the part. The only seminaries that might avoid this are those that differentiate on the basis not of sexual orientation, but of honesty, which is a primary requisite for any form of psycho-sexual maturity. And there are some that do, presumably with the permission of wise Bishops, but in quiet contravention of the official line. These of course are instantly vulnerable to accusations of being liberal, of promoting homosexuality or whatever, when in practical terms, the reverse is true. For

honesty is effectively forbidden by a Church teaching, which tells you that you are an intrinsically heterosexual person who is inexplicably suffering from a grave objective disorder called “same-sex attraction”. And so we get seminaries in which there are no gay seminarians, but whose rectors nevertheless push programmes like those of “Courage” on their oh-so-non-gay-but-transitorily-same-sex-attracted charges.

A fourth dimension: no attempt to view this issue through culture war lenses will be helpful. The clerical closet is not the result of some 1960s liberal conspiracy. It is a systemic structure in which, absent scandal, all of its survivors are functional. In the previous round of the blame-the-gays game, from 2002 on, much was made of the supposed culpability of liberal Vatican II bishops such as Rembert Weakland. The idea was that the new breed of John Paul II hardliners would sort it out. Men like John Nienstedt and John Myers. Oh wait really? Then again, does anyone seriously think the four cardinals of the “dubia” to be proportionately more heterosexual than the rest of the hierarchy? This is not a matter of left or right, traditional or progressive, good or bad, chaste or practising; nor even a matter of twenty five years of Karol Wojtyla’s notoriously poor judgment of character, though all these feed into it. It is a systemic structural trap, and if we are to get out of it, it must be described in such a way as to recognise that unknowing innocence as much as knowing guilt, well-meaning error as well as malice, has been, and is, involved in both its constitution and its maintenance. To that I will turn next week.

James Alison is a priest, theologian, lecturer, retreat giver and itinerant preacher. When not on the road, he lives in Madrid, Spain.