

This document is a compilation of two articles which were published in **The Tablet** on 4th and 11th August 2018 respectively, under the titles “*Homosexuality among the clergy: caught in a trap of dishonesty*” and “*The lying trap: why gay priests can be truthful about their sexuality*”. Here they appear under the titles I gave them originally.

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. Their refusal 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. This I will do before setting 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: I write 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 task I will now turn.

Mercy and the Lying Game

In case it is not obvious, I write neither as a journalist, a sociologist, nor an historian: from the outside of what I describe. I am a priest who aspires to be a theologian, one who is entirely complicit with the realities involved. I realised, over twenty years ago, that the only thing stronger than the systemic trap in which I found myself, as it tried to spit me out, was forgiveness. Every accusatory approach, every desire for vengeance, every culturally or politically convenient way of point-scoring, merely helps tighten the self-defensive knots of the system. Hence the title of my first book to deal with this issue: ***Faith beyond Resentment***. I have tried since then to incarnate and to preach forgiveness long before its need has been recognised, aware that no apparently sacred earthly structure (“principality” or “power” in St Paul’s language) can withstand the recognition that it is based on a lie. It is forgiveness which opens

up the truth of things by revealing contingency and mutability, things that can be let go, where only sacral fixity and necessity seem to reign.

I offer, then, a (maybe dangerously) abbreviated reading-from-mercy of some elements of how we got here. Think back to the late nineteenth century. You have the beginnings of the strong impulse to female equality which would soon change voting laws throughout the western world. You have the beginnings of psychology, and with it the talkability of things that had previously not been mentionable, as well as a growing recognition of the objectivity of elements of human “subjectivity”. You also had the coining of the term “homosexual”, shifting the definition of the person involved from the criminal to some sort of quasi clinical way-of-being. And you had, in different languages, a growing literary fiction exploring in ever less coded ways the lives and desires of people we would now describe as gay or lesbian. If you were born in the 1890’s, laws against homosexuality, blackmail, violence and mysterious suicides would have been in the formative ether of your growing-up. It was still a world in which most professions would have been male-only for some decades to come, and an informal “don’t ask don’t tell” about many indiscretions would have been standard.

Fast forward to someone born in Europe or North America in the 1990’s. A different universe. Female equality dramatically closer, psycho-sexual realities being discussed openly with a growing expectation of honesty, being gay no longer either criminal or clinical, same-sex marriage on the horizon, and a plethora of literature, films, role models and so on enjoyed as much by straight as by gay people. Many problems still in many places, but how far from the world where the British Government could ensure the execution of Roger Casement by leaking the diaries where he named his lovers, thus shocking a great man’s highly-placed supporters into shamed silence?

And what of clerical life over the same century? While the young men born in the 1890’s might not, despite a growing literature, have had words or names for themselves, one thing was clear: in a brutal world, a mono-sexual clerical caste where no one questioned your unmarried status was the safest place to be. Not only because you would be physically and legally safer in a genuinely “don’t ask, don’t tell” world. But also, and this is the part often forgotten, because if you wanted to be good, you may well have been horrified at the squalor, moral and otherwise, which seemed to be what your boyish love would turn into over time, with no models better than young comrades, dead in war. In a clergy in which the only teaching at the time was about *acts*, it was not only a safe space, but one in which, by avoiding those acts, you could aspire to goodness.

However as the century evolved, the world moved on at every level. With far fewer single-sex professions and associations, the traditional “don’t ask don’t

tell” of same-sex sociability was falling apart, women quickly picking up things about men that straight men don’t perceive. Following the mass mobilisations of the first half of the century, many more young people became aware of others like themselves. Emboldened to talk publicly about their lives and feelings in the first person, they began to live relatively openly, with ever less police attention or employment discrimination. De-criminalisation advanced all over the western world. Primitive attempts to “cure homosexuals” yielded to the scientific realisation that there is a relatively stable life-long orientation underlying “being this way”, and no pathology intrinsic to it. The science was firm by the 1950s, and has only been growing clearer since. Moreover, life-long models of decent living: coupled, single, with children were becoming available. In short, for gay and lesbian people at least, the social ether was unimaginably healthier.

Meanwhile, the clerical safe space with its (comparatively) soft, informal “hypocrisy” was, by comparison, becoming an ever more unsafe space as safety grew around it. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” is not particularly cruel when it is just the way things are for the whole of society. But when “don’t ask, don’t tell” shifts into becoming an ever more explicit imposition on a small group in the midst of a growing ease with “asking” and “telling” around them, you are heading for an artificially constructed trap. Not least because those on the outside can see ever more clearly what those on the inside have to pretend isn’t there. Think of the politically inspired imposition of an already socially moribund “don’t ask don’t tell” on our militaries in the 1990’s. The result was an increase in persecution, dismissals, fearfulness, vindictiveness, loss of talent, and power to the zealots.

However the biggest threat to the old safe space in which “acts” were evil, and “being” was not defined, came as science caught up with the evidence of people’s lives: evidence that a same-sex orientation is a more or less stable, regularly occurring, non-pathological minority variant in the human condition. What must it have been like for a gay cleric of the generation of Paul VI? You have lived through the social and psychological changes of the century, and you rejoice, as Vatican II did, at all that was positive in the post-war years. And yet at the same time the previous world’s “underside” (identification with which you might have been at some level fleeing for decades, and for good moral reasons), was about to creep not only into the open, in the carnivalesque sense of Stonewall and subsequent Pride movements, but into the soul as something that you just are.

It is no surprise that the first ever public use by the Roman Congregations of the word “homosexual” is in some short paragraphs (*Persona Humana* 1975) whose main thrust is to insist that no understanding of “being” should ever be allowed to justify “acts”. Although the link was not fully explained in 1975, the

underlying reason is clear: the maintenance of the evil of the “acts” depends upon the status of “being that way” as somehow negative or anomalous. For if the “being” were a non-pathological minority variant, then of course, the “acts” might in some circumstances be an appropriately human expression. By 1986 the rationale needed to be made more explicit, and so the “homosexual tendency” had to be described as “objectively disordered” in order to maintain the “intrinsically evil” nature of the acts (*Homosexualitatis Problema* 1986). And with that description, an aprioristic deduction was made to trump any human scientific learning, and the once safe space became a definitional trap for any who had entered into it, and for all those entering into it henceforth.

Let me explain: Think of those coming into the seminary world between, say, 1960 and 1990. They will have been undergoing a shift in understanding from a world in which “acts” were bad, and “being” meant “not like *them*”, to a world in which “being” meant “actually quite like them, and so what?” and “acts” being fairly banal. Given that some realise they are gay when pre-pubertal, and others not until middle-age, you can imagine that a significant number of young men, unsure of themselves, and formed, at least in part, by traditional attitudes placing them at risk of hell, join the seminary half-believing in their disordered being. Eventually they find others like themselves, and it may only be years after ordination that, through love or learning, they discover that there is nothing wrong with their “being”.

If the discovery (that what their employer teaches them about themselves is wrong) be made early enough and they are bothered by it, they may leave. If the discovery occurs during their own personal and professional growing up as priests, they may realise that their commitments (i.e. to the discipline of celibacy or vows) are not valid. For such commitments were assumed while those making them were under the influence of a false teaching concerning themselves, a teaching imposed on them as if from God by their employer. So, loving the priesthood, they continue their work (some are too old to be able to leave without penury) and may entertain discreet relationships in good conscience.

Thus you have the bizarre situation in which a teaching which, in context, originally helped genuinely pious gay men of yesteryear who wanted to live chastely (and I imagine that at least a couple of recent Holy Fathers were of this sort) has become converted by “facts on the ground” (and the theological attempt to resist them) into a trap. Those gay clerics who become relatively healthy through their experience with others like themselves in their ecclesial belonging (and that’s not a few in every generation moving forward) learn discretely to ignore both a teaching based on a falsehood about who they are, and the formal commitments made while under the illusion of that false teaching, and it becomes functional for everyone to turn a blind eye. The same

teaching is functional for those who are extremely unhealthy (it reinforces their refusal to accept who they are) and for opportunistic careerists, enabling these two latter types to become the most vociferous allies of the genuinely pious, but frightened, senior celibates in the maintenance of the appearance of the old world. Doesn't that look like much of the senior clergy from, say, 1965 to 2013?

Tangentially, I hope it also hints at why such a mutually deceptive gay-heavy world has been so useless at dealing with child abuse. "Don't ask don't tell" can function as a way of genuine mercy among gay men who don't want to cast stones in a glass house where the assumption is of relationships which may be illicit according to house rules, but are neither illegal nor pathological. But it can also be used (and certainly has been) as a cover for blackmail by those who have genuinely illegal and pathological behaviour to hide. The combination of these two has led to an inability to distinguish, in practice, between "naughty" gay men and "criminal" pedophiles. The instinct not to want to know, especially if senior people are involved, is very strong, as the Chilean debacle has demonstrated.

What is to be done, and what is quietly happening? In my view the first thing is for the laity to be encouraged in their fast growing majority acceptance of being gay as a normal part of life. This, despite fierce resistance from elements of the clerical closet. Pope Francis' reported conversation with Juan Carlos Cruz (a gay man abused in his youth by the Chilean priest, Fr Karadima) is a gem in this area: "Look Juan Carlos, the pope loves you this way. God made you like this and he loves you". This remark led to much spluttering and explaining away from those who realise that the moment you say "God made you like this" then the game is up as regards the "intrinsic evil" of the acts.

Nevertheless, it is only when straightforward, and obviously true, Christian messaging like Francis' becomes normal among the laity themselves that honesty can become the norm among the clergy. Otherwise we will continue with the absurd and pharisaical current situation in which there is one rule for the clergy ("doesn't matter what you do so long as you don't say so in public or challenge the teaching") and another for the laity, passed off as "the teaching of the Church", and brutally enforced, for instance, among employees of Catholic schools, parish organists, softball coaches and the like.

Only when it is clear (as it is increasingly) that the laity are quite confident in the (obviously true) view that "if you are this way, then learning to love appropriately is going to flow from, not despite, this" will it be possible to change, without scandal, the formal rules regarding the clergy. I bring this out since much was made of Francis' reported answer to the Italian Bishops when asked if they should admit gay men to the seminary: "if you are in any doubt, no". This was read as Francis being against gay men.

I read the remark differently: that of a wise and merciful man addressing a group of men, a significant proportion of whom are gay, and telling them, in effect, that only those among them who are capable of honesty in dealing with their future charges should induct people like themselves into the clergy. “Are you yourself going to vacillate in standing up publicly for the honesty of the young man? If so, don’t make his future dependent on your cowardice”.

It looks to me as though the Lord’s mercy, already reaching lay people as relief and as joy, is beginning to pierce the clerical closet in the shape of a firm, but gently upheld, demand for penitential first-person truthfulness as we are painfully let go from the systemic trap. The alternative, as Francis surely knows, is to continue with liars inducting liars into a game, the closet forming and enforcing the closet. And all of us finding that the Lord’s vineyard is very properly being taken away from us, its terrified tenants, and put into the hands of others, determined neither by sexual orientation, marital status or gender, who will produce its fruit.

James Alison
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