Homosexuality and Priesthood

A generation ago, homosexuality in the priesthood was not publicly acknowledged. If it did not exist, there was no need to discuss it. This was a disservice to those who served as faithful presbyters, often tormented by an inner secret they could not share. Now the incidence of homosexuality in the priesthood is widely acknowledged. If there are a substantial number of homosexual priests (between 30 and 50 percent in some estimates) it is necessary to face the facts, in Donald Cozzens’ phrase. The new openness, however, may not be the service it seems when the question of homosexuality in the priesthood is presented in a sensationalist way, such as Michael Rose’s Goodbye, Good Men (2002). Openness is a better option than secrecy, but an attempt to outline the status quaestionis (i.e., the state of the question) needs serene clarity on what we are discussing, and why.

Proceeding via negativa we can identify some of the issues. The question is not whether homosexuals can be priests or not. There have been, are, and presumably will be homosexual priests. Press reports (for instance, The Tablet 3 May 2001) suggest that important Vatican officials think that men with a homosexual orientation cannot be admitted to seminaries because they will always be tempted towards acts that are in themselves evil. This begs the question, as we will see, and one has to be cautious about press reports. Whether homosexuals are always good priests is also beside the question: not every heterosexual priest is a saint. I can see nothing in the relevant canons on admission to seminary training (C. 241) or to priestly ordination (Cc. 1024–1031) that explicitly excludes homosexuals. Indeed, if someone is canonically suitable, they cannot legitimately be refused orders (C. 1026). The issue is neither factual nor canonical. Perhaps, therefore, it can be found in the interpretation of the facts or the application of the law?

The facts about homosexual priests are open to different interpretations for a number of reasons. Homosexuality is a recent term dating from the nineteenth century. The concept of a homosexual person is also recent, in the sense that traditional moral theology talked about actions that were not natural. To say someone is homosexual is meaningless without further specification: there are clear differences between the occasional, camp, celibate, and politically active homosexual, to take just

Raphael Gallagher, C.Ss.R., of Dublin, is an invited professor at the Alphonsian Academy in Rome.
some aspects. More fundamentally, it is not accurate to classify humanity as either homosexual or heterosexual because it excludes other categories (such as bisexuality) and ignores the fact that gender identification is a much more complex process than a simple statement of gender identity implies. Sexuality is a continuum of ways of relating; the reduction of the process to stereotypes is dangerous. Thus, a presumption that we know what we are talking about when we introduce the topic “homosexuality and priesthood” can be blighted by a factual confusion at the start of the discussion. What kind of homosexual (and there are many kinds) must first be agreed on before constructive conversation can continue.

In the application of canonical criteria, the crucial question is whether a person of homosexual orientation, disposition, or identity can be evaluated positively within the range of good ways of being human. If someone is judged to be humanly flawed, such a person cannot be considered as morally admirable. The persistence of the terminology “objective disorder” applied to the homosexual inclination remains seriously problematical because it can lead to the interpretation that homosexuals should not be admitted to priesthood precisely because, being disordered, they will not enjoy the good reputation or possess the positive qualities appropriate to priesthood (c. 1029).

The more temperate language of other magisterial statements on the rights of homosexuals to their good name (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2358) counts for little in such arguments because, counterbalanced with the public nature of priestly ministry, personal rights are likely to be subordinated to the common good which, by implication, cannot be cared for by people with a disordered inclination. If an inclination is implicitly excluded from the range of human goods, it is inevitable that weight of the argument will favour excluding such persons from priesthood. What objectively disordered means is unclear, and whether an inclination is properly understood as act-directed needs theological clarification. Arguments based on unclear terms lead to questionable conclusions.

The silence on the question of homosexuals in the priesthood (broken in the 1970s by, among others, Fr. John Harvey and the group Renewal Rest and Recreation) should not be returned to. However, the present conversations on the question are too molded by the context in which they arose in the intervening years, including an unjustified association between homosexuality and all clerical sexual abuse. We need a well-formulated status quaestionis. Homosexuality and priesthood should be discussed as a question framed within the terms of sexuality and church. It is from these primary categories that the secondary questions take their shape.

There is no credible evidence that sexual identity, disposition, or orientation in se affect the personal capacity to live the chaste and celibate life prescribed for Catholic priesthood. Where there is overwhelming evidence is that immature psychosexual integration, an inadequate sense of identity, and an inability to sustain adult relationships undermine the ministry of all priests. This would suggest that the theological discussion should take its focus from the requirements of sexual maturity rather than sexual orientation. The dynamics of personal integration for a homosexual priest will surely include aspects not experienced by heterosexuals: this should be admitted. There are two major factors at work here. An unwelcoming environment can drive homosexuals underground, with the consequence that they struggle for their identity in secrecy, fear, or shame. Such people are hardly likely to become well-adjusted priests in public ministry. In reaction to this, some
homosexual priests will risk a false over-compensation by flaunting their homosexuality or creating a network of subcultures where they feel more accepted.

The core personal identity of a priest, which has to include being a minister of Christ at the service of God’s people, thus risks serious misplacement. Being driven to lead a secret life or opting for exhibitionist exaggerations are the current unhealthy temptations for many homosexual priests. This problem is, however, not necessarily caused by homosexual priests themselves.

In the priesthood generally, there are too many maladjusted priests who show an arrogant disdain for others and who cover up their personal agenda through sarcasm, hostility, manipulation, and various power-plays. It would be imprudent not to acknowledge that homosexual priests are also prone to these aberrations. The first aspect of the truth to be stated is, however, the wider one. Sexual ambivalence in general, not varying shades of homosexuality in particular, is the framework within which to work.

If the debate on homosexuality and priesthood should not be theoretically separated from this more fundamental discussion of sexuality and priesthood, of equal importance is the second element of my status quaestionis which links priesthood and church. The persistence of a clerical caste system is baffling, and it impinges directly on our discussion when that system is a male one. The problem here is not the exclusive admission of males to priesthood, but the poor understanding of priesthood itself in its relationship to the church. Since the late Middle Ages the sacrament of orders was principally defined in terms of priesthood and the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice. With Lumen Gentium (see nos. 21 and 26), the theological parameters have changed: ordination is to the threefold ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care. This is an epochal change of emphasis that can only be understood in terms of a different (that is, non-Tridentine) ecclesiology. We thereby give a renewed appreciation to baptism as the defining entry into the life of the church. Each baptized person participates in Christ’s threefold office as prophet, priest, and king. There are, consequently, a variety of ministries within the church.

This implies that participation in the ministry of the church should be the norm rather than the exception. The life of the church includes both the general distribution of ministries and the particular assignment of specific roles and functions to those who have been gifted with the sacramental priesthood. It is necessary to state all this because I am outlining the issues about homosexuality and priesthood. Little attention is being paid to the latter element in this discussion. The pressures of a male priesthood are not only sexual: they are ecclesial. A reshaping of the debate along the lines indicated would facilitate the understanding of the church as a sexual community in which ministries are shared. The sharp edge of the debate would thus move from homosexuality and priesthood to sexuality and church. It would become clearer that the real problem is not whether there are too many, or too few, homosexual priests. The persistence of a caste system of priesthood, and in our case a male one, which is not intrinsically related to a church of many ministries is placing too much pressure on priests. The problem is with the system of priesthood, not its membership. Framing the question of homosexuality and priesthood in these ways could have surprising results, including greater clarity on the central terms: what sexuality? whose priesthood?

No one has a right to be a priest. If not canonically impeded, no one should be denied the possibility of testing their
vocation. This invites all of us to be humble, perhaps the virtue most indicated for this debate. Cries of gay pride or protestations about the power of the priest should be foreign to a debate where it is God’s plan for the church that is at stake. Homosexuals in the priesthood will be understood only after the church has an honest conversation on the more basic question of sexual and Christian identity.