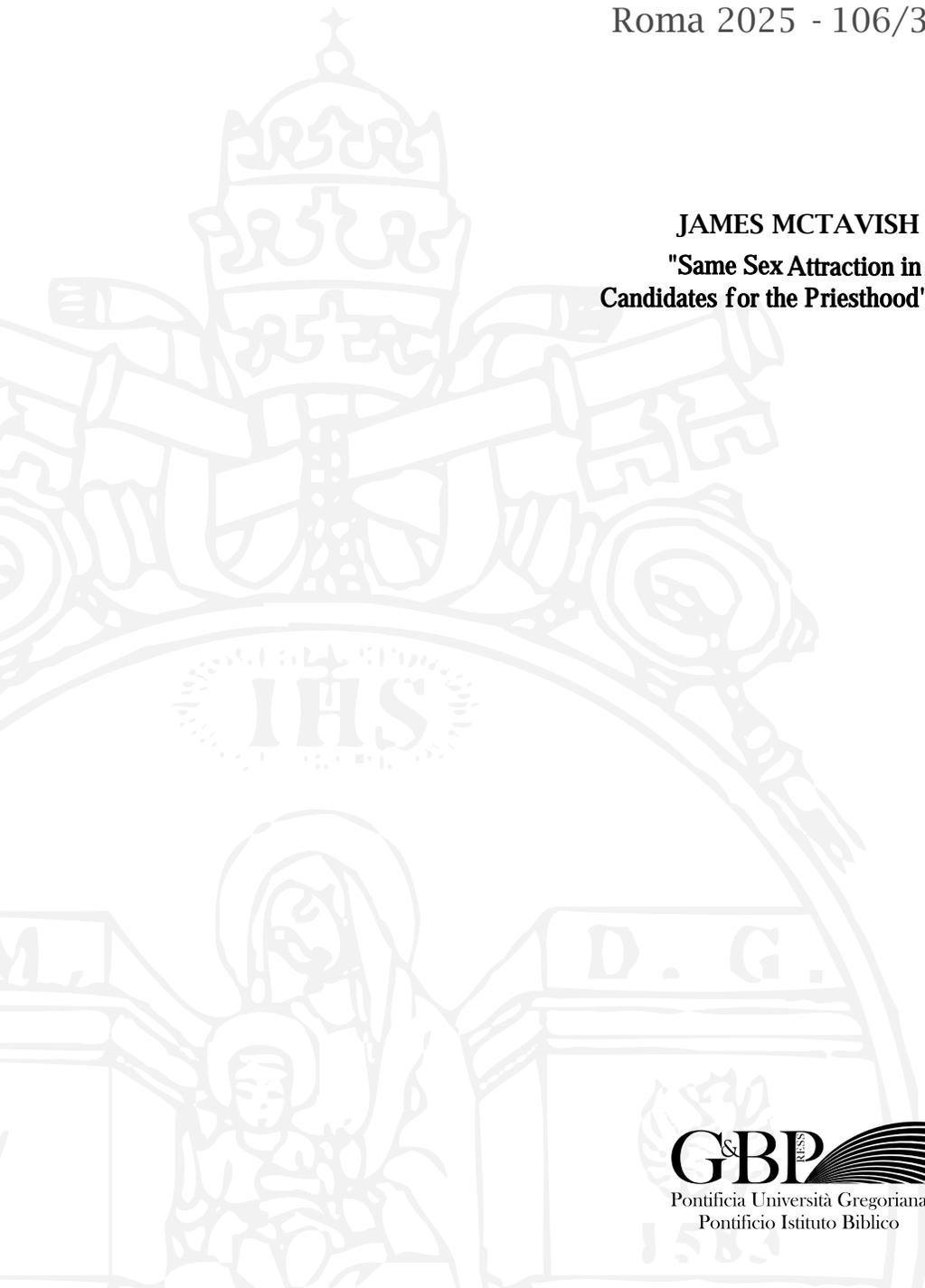


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**"Same Sex Attraction in
Candidates for the Priesthood"**



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Same Sex Attraction in Candidates for the Priesthood

In this essay, we will look at same sex attraction (SSA) in the priesthood.¹ The issue again came to the fore following comments by Pope Francis in 2024 about homosexuality in the seminary. During a closed meeting with Italian Bishops, the Pope had purportedly used a pejorative term, which was then leaked to the media and became worldwide news. This prompted the Director of the Holy See Press Office, Matteo Bruni, to release the following statement.

Pope Francis is aware of the recent articles regarding a closed-door conversation with the bishops of the CEI [Italian Bishops' Conference]. As he has stated on many occasions, 'There is room for everyone in the Church, for everyone! No one is useless; no one is superfluous; there is room for everyone. Just as we are, everyone.' The Pope never intended to offend or express himself in homophobic terms, and he apologizes to those who felt offended by the use of a term, as reported by others.²

Thereafter in a meeting with priests at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome, the Pope again discussed the issue of admission of homosexuals to seminaries. Pope Francis stated, "What I have said on this topic: if a boy wants to enter the Seminary and has a homosexual tendency, impede him. The Dicastery for the Clergy has said it and I support it. Because today the homosexual culture has progressed a lot and there are good boys who love the

¹ I would like to thank Fr. Gerard Whelan, SJ, Fr. Iwao Ikegami, FMVD, Sr. Valentina Stilo, FMVD, Edwin Valles and Emy Abaya for their insightful comments on the initial draft of this paper. I am grateful also to John Healy whose feedback has been most helpful.

² VATICAN NEWS, "Pope Francis never intended to offend."

Lord, but it's better not to do so, better not to do so."³ He reiterated the need to welcome them and accompany them in the Church as well as prudentially applying Church teaching regarding their entry into the seminary.⁴ Let us take the opportunity to have a more balanced and nuanced view of this delicate and sensitive issue.

I. ADMISSION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

The Church produced clear guidelines in 2005 with a document entitled "Instruction concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders" (hereafter "Instruction") from the Congregation (now Dicastery) for Catholic Education (CCE).

The Church cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who:

1. Practise homosexuality
2. Present deep-seated homosexual tendencies
3. Support the so-called "gay culture."⁵

At first sight, the three criteria are relatively straightforward. A person cannot be admitted to the seminary (or to holy orders) if they practise homosexuality, if they have deep-seated same sex attraction, or if they support the "gay culture." What is important though is that the criteria are applied and implemented. The dialogue and discernment with the vocations' director and rector of the seminary will also be critical in this determination.

The Congregation for the Clergy, in its 2016 document, "The Gift of the Priestly Vocation," simply reiterates parts of this Instruction: "If a candidate practises homosexuality or presents deep-seated homosexual tendencies, his spiritual director as well as his confessor have the duty to dissuade him in conscience from proceeding towards ordination". In any case, "it would be gravely dishonest for a candidate to hide his own homosexuality in order to proceed, despite everything, towards ordination."⁶

³ FRANCIS as quoted by J.E. MÚJICAFRO in "Vatican Chronicles."

⁴ A. MARTÍNEZ-BORDIÚ – W. S. SILVA, "Vatican: Pope Francis speaks again."

⁵ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 2.

⁶ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 200.

II. DEEP-SEATED SSA

The “Instruction” gives no further precise explanation of how “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” may present. Kleponis, a psychologist and pastoral counsellor, and Fitzgibbons, a psychiatrist, both US based experts who have years of experience between them working with seminary candidates, describe deep-seated SSA in the following way.

Those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies often identify themselves as “gay men” which is based to a large extent upon their sexual attractions. They often reject the current scientific findings that there is no genetic or biological basis for SSA and believe they were born this way. They do not view homosexuality as a disordered inclination, are comfortable with their sexual attractions, subscribe to the increasingly prevalent belief that homosexuality is a normal variation in human sexuality, and think there is nothing wrong with homosexual acts. Their beliefs make them highly vulnerable to sexual acting out.

Men with deep-seated homosexual tendencies are usually unwilling to examine the possibility that they experienced emotional conflicts in significant male relationships that result in same-sex attraction. When asked, they are often unable to name a best male friend in elementary school. Their strong physical attraction to other men’s bodies and to the masculinity of others is the result of profound weakness in male confidence, a craving for male acceptance, and a poor body image. They have a significant affective immaturity with excessive anger and jealousy toward males who are not homosexual. Their insecurity leads them to avoid close friendships with other men who do not have SSA.⁷

This description may permit us to identify three aspects of deep-seated SSA. First, this depth can be gauged by the intensity of the feelings and whether the candidate finds them manageable or not. Second, it makes a difference whether these feelings have been present since childhood, as far back as the seminarian can remember or are of more recent origin. Third, if a man has had multiple sexual encounters with other homosexual (or bisexual) men, the behaviour itself has become deep-seated, as in a vice or vitiated state.

⁷ P.C. KLEPONIS – R.P. FITZGIBBONS, “The Distinction between,” 356-357.

III. TRANSITORY SSA

The “Instruction” adds, “Different, however, would be the case in which one were dealing with homosexual tendencies that were only the expression of a transitory problem - for example, that of an adolescence not yet superseded. Nevertheless, the candidate must have clearly overcome such tendencies at least three years before ordination to the diaconate.”⁸ Thus, the Church underlines the difference between deep-seated homosexual tendencies and homosexual tendencies that are only the expression of a “transitory problem.”

Regarding transitory SSA, Kleponis and Fitzgibbons note:

Candidates with transitory same-sex attractions do not base their masculine identity upon their sexual attractions. While not understanding fully the origins of their same-sex attractions, they do not believe they were born with them and greatly desire to overcome them. Usually, they have not had a history of homosexual acting out. They accept the fullness of the Church’s teaching on sexual morality and want to live and teach it. They do not subscribe to current societal views on homosexuality and same-sex unions.

These young men are highly motivated to work in psychotherapy to identify the origins of their conflicts and to resolve them. The most common conflicts identified that caused weaknesses in male confidence arises from the failure to develop close male friendships in early childhood, most often because of a lack of eye-hand coordination that is necessary to participate comfortably in baseball, basketball, soccer, football, and gym activities. In a culture that has a great focus on sports, it is difficult for a boy to develop healthy male confidence if he does not participate in some athletic activity.

Close male friendships often are not present in childhood, resulting in a deep loneliness, sadness, insecurity, anxiety, anger, and poor body image. The attraction to other males often begins prior to adolescence and is an unconscious attempt to escape from emotional pain. Also, a lack of secure attachment to the father is present in some of these men that intensifies loneliness and male insecurity.⁹

These authors also state that “transitory same-sex attractions can be identified and resolved with appropriate psychotherapy combined with spiritual direction.”¹⁰ In the current cultural milieu, it is increasingly likely that we

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 2.

⁹ P.C. KLEPONIS – R.P. FITZGIBBONS, “The Distinction between,” 357-358.

¹⁰ P.C. KLEPONIS – R.P. FITZGIBBONS, “The Distinction between,” 361. Regarding the fluidity of SSA in males, and the possibility that SSA can decrease, see C. PELA – P.M. SUTTON, “Sexual Attraction Fluidity,” 61-86. The authors are not endorsing so-called “conversion therapy”

will encounter more candidates with varying degrees of confusion about their sexual orientation. They may even consider that they are “gay” but, in reality, do not have SSA. This confusion is one of the many adverse outcomes of the media bombardment (and even brainwashing) with the insistence to “come out.” Many young people who are confused about their sexuality actually need to “go in” and discover what is happening deeper within them. They may have misappropriately labelled themselves as “gay” when in fact, they may be experiencing what is only a transitory attraction, or may have had an isolated episode of same sex behaviour without having any same sex attraction at all. Such candidates can indeed be helped with appropriate formation and guidance. For this reason, blanket “no’s” in the area of homosexuality and seminary admission are generally unhelpful and, at times, even unjust, as a young man with confusion about his sexual orientation should not be dismissed prematurely without a proper evaluation and discernment.

IV. SECULAR “SCIENTIFIC” VOICES

The secular vision of homosexuality is often at loggerheads with the Catholic understanding. The World Medical Association (WMA), in its revised statement of 2023, now considers homosexuality as a natural variation of human sexuality.

A large body of scientific research indicates that being lesbian, gay, or bisexual constitute natural variations of human sexuality without any intrinsically harmful health effects. They do not constitute a disorder or illness that requires treatment or cure and any efforts to do so are contrary to the ethical practice of medicine. Homosexuality and bisexuality are consequently not included in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Classification of Diseases (ICD 11).¹¹

We do not find the terms “deep-seated” or “transitory” in the teaching of the American Psychological Association (APA) either. We are not overly concerned as in most areas of human sexuality, particularly regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, the vision of many professional medical organizations diverges widely from Catholic thought. The Catholic Church does endeavour to incorporate certain insights of the APA, and indeed agrees that

but rather underlining the at-times fluid nature of sexual attraction, and thus the possibility of change.

¹¹ WORLD MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, “WMA statement.”

the causes of homosexuality are usually unknown.¹² However, the stance of both the WMA and the APA tends to discourage any further research on such issues. A purely secular vision is unhealthy when it silences alternative viewpoints and stifles any further reflection, making it less likely that any new or relevant literature will be published on priesthood and SSA.¹³

V. THE IMPORTANCE OF CHASTITY

God calls all baptized people to live chastely. Chastity is variously understood as:

- “An apprenticeship in self-mastery, which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy.”¹⁴
- “The joyous affirmation of someone who knows how to live self-giving, free from any form of self-centred slavery. The chaste person is not self-centred or involved in selfish relationships with other people. Chastity makes the personality harmonious. It matures it and fills it with inner peace.”¹⁵

¹² The current AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION website states (under “Understanding sexual orientation”), “There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.” The CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (2357) has “its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained.”

¹³ The danger of a purely secular vision on human sexuality is clearly seen in the fiasco surrounding gender medicine. For nearly a decade, the “gender affirmative” view has railroaded thousands of young people with gender identity confusion into a medicalized treatment paradigm consisting of puberty blockers, cross sex hormones and possible surgery. The Catholic Church has been heavily criticized when she prudently attempted to question such an approach. Recently the Cass review, the world’s biggest ever study into gender medicine, was published in the United Kingdom. The review critiqued the “toxic” research environment which prohibited any legitimate questioning of the predominant affirmative paradigm and called for more caution in helping gender confused young people in a way that lends much credence to the Catholic vision. We should not be disheartened then when we find that the secular vision does not always coincide (yet) with our Catholic one. See H. CASS, *The Cass Review*, 13, where Dr Cass notes “the toxicity of the debate is exceptional.”

¹⁴ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2339.

¹⁵ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *The Truth and Meaning*, 17.

- “Spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness.”¹⁶

Those in the priesthood and religious life are called to live their chastity in celibacy, in other words, with no genital-sexual relationships. This calling must be a non-negotiable, free and binding option in Christ. Infidelity here can lead to tragic and devastating consequences in the Body of Christ. A misconception would be to consider that a priest cannot thus experience intimacy. This is not strictly true, as intimacy has various dimensions, not merely a genital-sexual one. Holistic intimacy also includes emotional, intellectual, psychological, social and, of course, spiritual dimensions. The genuine need for intimacy can be fulfilled in healthy, life-giving ways such as in wholesome friendships (with both sexes), balanced contact with the biological family of origin, and a supportive community setting, remembering that chastity is best maintained in a healthy fraternal environment.¹⁷

I. Affective maturity and discernment of suitability

The Church teaches that “the candidate to the ordained ministry, therefore, must reach affective maturity. Such maturity will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women, developing in him a true sense of spiritual fatherhood towards the Church community that will be entrusted to him.”¹⁸ In the seminary setting, the rector and spiritual director have the vital task of discerning candidates’ suitability and affective maturity. “The discernment of a vocation and of the maturity of the candidate is also a serious duty of the rector and of the other persons entrusted with the work of formation in the seminary.”¹⁹ In a case personally recounted to me by his formators, a candidate with deep-seated SSA did not reveal anything during his long years of formation, and only “came out” during the celebration after his priestly ordination. Between the seminarian who admits to having SSA and one who does not admit but does have it, the latter is the more problematic in the long run. The suppression

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 33.

¹⁷ This chaste love, “neither selfish nor exclusive, neither possessive nor enslaved to passion, but universal and disinterested, free and freeing, so necessary for mission, is cultivated and grows through fraternal life,” CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Fraternal Life in Community*, 44.

¹⁸ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 1.

¹⁹ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 3.

is not always conscious; some are in denial, or some are not aware that they have deep-seated SSA until later, perhaps when they receive inputs about sexuality in their formation process. It is important to identify if the candidate has SSA and to help them with any mental health concerns he may have. It is recognized in the medical world that persons with SSA may be at increased risk of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and bipolar disorder.²⁰ The Mayo Clinic in the USA, for example, also notes that “gay men also are more likely to have body image problems and eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, than are other men” as well as being “more likely to deal with alcohol use disorder than are other people.”²¹ A holistic formation program would need to be attentive to such issues and to assist the candidate appropriately. Some of these mental health issues in themselves might be relative (or even absolute) impediments to seminary or consecrated life. Candidates may require specific support better provided in a context outside these settings.

Regarding the spiritual director (and confessor), we note:

In the discernment concerning the suitability for ordination, the spiritual director has an important task. Although he is bound to secrecy, he represents the Church in the internal forum. In his discussions with the candidate, the spiritual director must especially point out the demands of the Church concerning priestly chastity and the affective maturity that is characteristic of the priest, as well as help him to discern whether he has the necessary qualities. The spiritual director has the obligation to evaluate all the qualities of the candidate’s personality and to make sure that he does not present disturbances of a sexual nature, which are incompatible with the priesthood. If a candidate practises homosexuality or presents deep-seated homosexual tendencies, his spiritual director as well as his confessor have the duty to dissuade him in conscience from proceeding towards ordination.²²

²⁰ SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual behavioral health*, 8. This US government report states that the prevalence of serious mental illness in the past year was more than twice as high among gay males than among straight males.

²¹ MAYO CLINIC, USA, “Health issues for gay men.”

²² CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 3.

2. To determine if SSA is present

It is essential to determine the possible presence and degree of same-sex attraction in a candidate, especially if it is deep-seated. This theme can be discussed in selection interviews or during the formation period. One must be careful not to label any effeminate mannerisms in a candidate as equal to being “gay.” Sometimes, certain gestures acceptable in one cultural context are inappropriately mislabelled as “gay” in another. This kind of judgement is a form of discrimination and prejudice. Effeminate behaviour may be a sign of underlying SSA, but it may not be. The candidate would need an in-depth psycho-sexual interview to find out if he really has any same-sex attraction.²³ If specialist help is required, only counsellors/therapists with views consistent with Catholic teaching should be sought as “there are many forces in our society that promote a view of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, that is not in accordance with God’s purpose and plan for human sexuality.”²⁴ The sexual history and questions related to sexual attraction and orientation can help clarify the sexual identity of the candidate. It is well established that prior sexual abuse (particularly by an older homosexual male) can be a risk factor for subsequent same sex attraction in a victim. The relationship of the candidate with both his father and mother can also shed light on aspects of their psycho-emotional ways of relating to others. Questions about peer friendships, difficulties with male bonding, and the sense of masculinity and body image also help build a more complete picture of a candidate’s masculine sexuality. Kleponis and Fitzgibbons give more detail in this regard:

Candidates are often simply asked if they are heterosexual or homosexual. In addition, some mental-health professionals try to identify sexual attractions through projective psychological testing. However, this approach is insufficient, particularly in view of the crisis in the Church. What is needed is an in-depth history of secure attachment relationships with male peers, the father, and male siblings, if present, to evaluate the development of male confidence in childhood, adolescence, and young adult life.

²³ It is also true that not all candidates will be open and transparent to fully declare their sexuality knowing that such a disclosure might hinder their entrance into the seminary or a religious community for example.

²⁴ UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, 1. Part of the challenge also is that there is no standardized test or even way of testing used throughout the universal Church to screen candidates for SSA.

Since male peer acceptance is crucial to the development of male confidence, it is important to determine when the candidate first experienced a best male friend and then the quality of that relationship. Often candidates with SSA, identify the best male friendship beginning in early adolescence.

Another important cause of male peer rejection, in addition to the inability to bond with other males in sports, is jealousy of the outstanding academic, musical, and artistic gifts of many of these men.

The evaluation the body image is also important because a poor body image intensifies male insecurity and can contribute to same-sex attractions. A man with a poor body image may want the perfect male body so much, that he develops a sexual attraction to other males.

Finally, an evaluation of any history of childhood homosexual experiences or abuse is necessary. Homosexual childhood sexual abuse severely damages male confidence. Also, some men develop same-sex attractions as a result of sexual abuse by older males.²⁵

Deep-seated SSA is likely to cause difficulties in community life, and this may often mark the person with concomitant psychological problems. A male with deep-seated SSA who seeks to live out his sexuality may seek emotional stability in a relationship with an older, fatherlike male figure (such as the formator or authority figure in the seminary or religious house). He may even promiscuously pursue multiple lovers, looking outside of himself for the sense of masculinity that he will only really find in himself. Community life in an all-male environment, such as the seminary or male religious house of formation, is usually not the best place for people with deep-seated SSA for various reasons: the high biological sex-drive of males (especially in the age group of 30-50 years old), and the sharing and intimacy of studying and living together often in close living arrangements. In addition, spiritual closeness can get confused with sexual intimacy. For this reason, the Church teaches, "it would be gravely imprudent to admit to the sacrament of Orders a seminarian who does not enjoy free and serene affective maturity. He must be faithful to celibate chastity through the exercise of human and priestly virtues, understood as openness to the action of grace, rather than the mere achievement of continence by will power alone."²⁶

²⁵ P. C. KLEPONIS – R.P. FITZGIBBONS, "The Distinction between," 358.

²⁶ CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 110.

3. *How about “consensual” adult relationships?*

The question is sometimes asked: can a priest with same sex attraction enter into a relationship with another adult male? The relationship between a priest with SSA and an adult male cannot be justified simply by labelling it “consensual.” Any relationship that springs from a pastoral (or spiritual) context can hardly be termed “consensual,” as a clear power imbalance or asymmetry will be at play. This imbalance is succinctly framed in a pastoral document from the Roman Catholic Church in Malta: “When a pastoral functionary engages in sexual contact or sexualized behaviour in a pastoral relationship, or in cases of an existing power imbalance, such behaviour is considered to be always abusive whether with or without consent.”²⁷ Stephen E. de Weger and Jodi Death from the Queensland University of Technology make it very clear that in such scenarios, an abusive cleric is willing to misuse their powers to abuse adult vulnerabilities.²⁸ The authors underline that the sexual relationship that takes place is also a form of professional misconduct on the part of the cleric. This misconduct is especially abhorrent when a rector or formator in a seminary initiates the relationship towards a younger seminarian, or when a religious superior approaches a younger person in formation. The woundedness in the victim caused by such abusive sexual relationship is deepened in these scenarios as it concomitantly involves abuse of power and authority, and often abuse of conscience. An example of the latter would be when the victim is certain of the wrongness of the abuse, but the perpetrator attempts to convince him that the sexual abuse taking place is part of God’s “loving plan” for them both.

In addition, such a priest in any type of sexual relationship, even if said to be “consensual,” would be breaking his obligation in Christ to live chastely. A priest with SSA is thus challenged to live his priesthood well (as are, of course, all priests!) and fully live his calling to chastity. At times this can be a tough battle. “Among all combats,” says St. Caesarius of Arles, “the combat for chastity is the most violent, because it is a daily combat, and because victory is very rare.”²⁹

²⁷ MALTESE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCE, *On Cases of Sexual Abuse*, 14.

²⁸ See S.E. DE WEGER – J. DEATH. “Clergy Sexual Misconduct.”

²⁹ CAESARIUS ARELATENSIS, *Epistula ad Virgenes* 2, 10 (Sch 345, 334).

4. *Sad but real testimonies*

A high-profile case of such abuse was that of the disgraced ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. The Vatican report from the year 2020 makes for sad reading and documents McCarrick's extensive history of grooming and abuse of both adult seminarians and minors.

In the same moment, Bottino saw McCarrick move his right hand to the young cleric's crotch area. Bottino observed McCarrick "moving his fingers up and down on [the cleric's] crotch" for several seconds, which was "plenty of time to see what he was doing." As McCarrick was touching him, the young cleric looked as though "he was paralyzed," with his eyes "wide open" like "a deer in the headlights." [...] As he was leaving, Bottino shook the young cleric's hand, which "was very sweaty and cold, in shock I think."³⁰

It is not easy to clarify to what extent priests with SSA perpetrate abusive behaviours with other adult males.³¹ At times, we might even see some hypocrisy in the Church hierarchy, where, on the one hand, it may denounce homosexuality but in practice, tolerate it. The Scottish ex-Cardinal, Keith O'Brien, publicly denounced same sex relationships as being "harmful to the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of those involved" and that same sex marriage would be "a grotesque subversion of a universally accepted human right."³² Often, those who exhibit a disproportionate abhorrence of homosexuality are latent homosexuals themselves. Cardinal O'Brien, who was then the President of the Bishops Conference of Scotland and Britain's most senior Catholic, later had to step down to undertake "spiritual renewal, prayer and penance" after it was revealed that he had been having long-standing abusive homosexual relationships with various men, who accused O'Brien of either sexually harassing them or pressuring them into sex.

One gets the impression that we may not hear about all the cases, and in some instances, there may be a culture of cover-up. In my work of safeguarding in different contexts in the Church, I have encountered cases of a novice master trying to abuse a male in formation (South America), a seminary rec-

³⁰ SECRETARIAT OF STATE OF THE HOLY SEE, *Report on the Holy See's Institutional Knowledge*, 91-92.

³¹ Of course, it goes without saying that priests with opposite sex attraction have also committed such wrongs, but these have already been well documented by others.

³² K. O'BRIEN, *Commentary in the Sunday Telegraph*.

tor engaging in a sexual relationship with a seminarian in return for reduced tuition fees (Asia), a male with deep-seated SSA being permitted to enter the seminary with the approval of the gay vocations director (Europe), a religious being persecuted because he did not support the gay practices of his batchmates (Asia), and a Superior who was involved in formation work making sexual advances towards other priests (Europe). What can we conclude from these anecdotes? The answer is that there are indeed cases of priests with SSA acting out sexually their orientation, breaking their commitment to celibate living and causing varying degrees of harm to their victims. In this regard, Pope Francis has stated, “The issue of homosexuality is a very serious issue that must be adequately discerned from the beginning with the candidates.”³³ Regarding the need to live chastely, he added, “It’s better for them to leave the ministry or the consecrated life rather than to live a double life.”

It is also worth noting that in countries where homosexuality is unjustly penalized, persons with SSA may face unjust discrimination. A candidate for a seminary in one African country was rejected just because he had a relative who was known to be gay. In these and other cases, it is good to remind ourselves of the teachings of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which strongly emphasizes that persons with SSA “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”³⁴

CONCLUSION

There is a universal call to holiness, and each person must be helped on his personal journey to holiness. “The Church seeks to enable every person to live out the universal call to holiness. Persons with a homosexual inclination ought to receive every aid and encouragement to embrace this call personally and fully. This will unavoidably involve much struggle and self-mastery, for following Jesus always means following the way of the Cross.”³⁵ Although all have the right and duty to strive for holiness, no one has the inherent right to be a priest, as the Catechism underlines: “No one has a right to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself; he is

³³ FRANCIS, “Comments in a book-length interview,” *ABC news*.

³⁴ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2358.

³⁵ US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, 13.

called to it by God. Anyone who thinks he recognizes the signs of God's call to the ordained ministry must humbly submit his desire to the authority of the Church, who has the responsibility and right to call someone to receive orders. Like every grace this sacrament can be received only as an unmerited gift."³⁶

It is helpful to remember that a candidate will not only be assessed on his sexuality alone. Many other important factors need to be considered, such as the capacity for prayer, openness to the formation process, docility to the Spirit, and suitability for priestly life, to name a few. A candidate with deep-seated SSA may be unable to pursue the vocation to the priesthood for a number of reasons not directly related to his sexuality. Thus, all candidates to the priesthood who have SSA need to undergo careful discernment. "The desire alone to become a priest is not sufficient, and there does not exist a right to receive sacred ordination. It belongs to the Church [...] to discern the suitability of him who desires to enter the seminary, to accompany him during his years of formation, and to call him to holy orders if he is judged to possess the necessary qualities."³⁷ The candidate has the primary responsibility for his own formation and to present truthfully his motivations for desiring priesthood. Sometimes, the candidate is afraid to express his SSA, and at times, we are hesitant to ask about it. "It would be gravely dishonest for a candidate to hide his own homosexuality in order to proceed, despite everything, towards ordination. Such a deceitful attitude does not correspond to the spirit of truth, loyalty and openness that must characterize the personality of him who believes he is called to serve Christ and his Church in the ministerial priesthood."³⁸ The Bishop/Superior and those responsible for helping to discern a candidate's suitability for entry into a seminary or community, and his ongoing formation/preparation "must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies."³⁹

It would be useful if the Bishop/Superior, through their teaching and catechesis, could make their support for the above points of Church teaching clear - ambiguity here can only prepare the way for future heartache, either in the candidate or the Church. Of course, where a candidate can no longer pursue his desired priestly vocation, for whatever reason(s), he should still be offered support, guidance and accompaniment to help him more clearly discern

³⁶ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1578.

³⁷ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 3.

³⁸ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 3.

³⁹ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction concerning the Criteria*, 2.

his vocation and place in the Church. Regarding this and the implementation of the “Instruction”, Van de Aardweg cautions, “for bishops and seminary regents who do not wholeheartedly endorse the spirit of the document or are naive in this respect, there is still ample room for flexibility. The ‘deepseatedness’ of this propensity is very often underestimated.”⁴⁰ The distinction between deep-seated and transitory remains helpful, reminding us not to treat homosexuality as a monolithic block, as indeed a homosexual person may experience his same sex attraction in different ways and degrees. A person with transitory SSA may be encouraged to pursue his vocation to priesthood in a way that a person with deep-seated SSA would not be. Nonetheless, it would indeed be helpful to have further clarification from the Church as to what exactly she understands by the term “deep-seated” attraction. How can we measure the “depth” of SSA? The Church clearly indicates the case for persons with transitory attractions, and for those with deep-seated ones. So, can we posit that there are persons with attractions somewhere in between the two – with attractions that are neither transitory nor deep-seated? If so, how do we assess and accompany persons with “mid-seated” SSA? What does the Instruction mean when it prohibits supporting the gay culture?

While these and other issues still need to be addressed, the call to celibate, chaste living must sound loudly in the ears and hearts of all priests. A priest with SSA must live his chaste commitment to Christ faithfully and courageously. As our Lord has indicated, an affective and human maturity, along with a robust spiritual life, is essential. “Remain united to me and you will bear much fruit, but cut off from me you can do nothing” (see John 15:4-5). All the spiritual means must be lived fully, with a resolute and determined spirit. These means would include a high degree of fidelity to prayer (and retreats), exam of conscience, daily rosary, regular confession, spiritual direction, and, ideally, some level of supervision. Despite the challenges of chaste living, it is still possible. We will indeed have many priests in our Church with SSA, which is not deep-seated. These priests take their spiritual life and self-care seriously and have a most fruitful ministry. The words of St. Francis de Sales are also encouraging. “While fruits are whole, you may store them up securely, some in straw, some in sand or amid their own foliage, but once bruised there is no means of preserving them save with sugar or honey. Even so the purity which has never been tampered with may well be preserved to the end, but when once that has ceased to exist nothing can ensure its exist-

⁴⁰ G.J.M. VAN DEN AARDWEG, “Abuse by Priests,” 286.

ence but the genuine devotion, which, as I have often said, is the very honey and sugar of the mind.”⁴¹

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ABSTRACT

Comments by Pope Francis in 2024 brought again to the fore the issue of homosexuality and the priesthood. In 2005, the Vatican produced guidelines for admission to seminary and ordination, making a distinction between same sex attraction that is transitory or deep-seated. Although not utilized by many professional medical bodies, these terms are still useful at a practical level. This article will discuss the implications and application of the Vatican’s teaching, underline the importance of chastity and the universal call to holiness, present some issues relating to safeguarding and emphasize the need for careful discernment of all candidates to priesthood.

Keywords: homosexuality – same sex attraction (SSA) – deep-seated – transitory – abuse – safeguarding – seminary – discernment – priesthood

RIASSUNTO

I commenti di Papa Francesco nel 2024 hanno riportato alla ribalta la questione della relazione tra l’omosessualità e il sacerdozio. Nel 2005 il Vaticano ha prodotto delle linee guida per l’ammissione al seminario e all’ordinazione, facendo una distinzione tra attrazione transitoria per lo stesso sesso e attrazione profondamente radicata. Sebbene non siano utilizzati da molti organismi medici professionali, questi termini sono ancora utili a livello pratico. Il presente

⁴¹ FRANCIS OF SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, III, XII.

articolo discuterà le implicazioni e l'applicazione dell'insegnamento Vaticano, sottolineerà l'importanza della castità e della chiamata universale alla santità, presenterà alcune questioni relative alla tutela delle persone e sottolineerà la necessità di un attento discernimento di tutti i candidati al sacerdozio.

Parole chiave: omosessualità – attrazione per lo stesso sesso – profondamente radicate – transitorio – abusi – tutela delle persone – seminario – discernimento – sacerdozio

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