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*Kevin Egan*

## Let's Talk About It

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The 'it' I proposed to talk about in this article is sexual orientation in the Catholic priesthood. When I mentioned to friends and colleagues I was planning to write this article I received different reactions. Those who were clerical and gay urged me to write saying that the topic needed to be brought out into the open. Lay persons on the other hand, were cautious. They pointed out that the subject matter was controversial and I would need to be careful. I take to heart the advice given by Raphael Gallagher: 'We should approach questions of sexual orientation with a serene awareness of our own lack of knowledge.'<sup>1</sup>

Since the subject matter is controversial and deeply personal I need to declare at the outset my own stance and background. I am married and work as a psychotherapist and lecturer. I was an ordained Franciscan for over thirty years. During that time, I worked on the staff of *St John Vianney Seminary* in Pretoria, South Africa. I also spent a year on the staff of the Southdown Institute in Toronto treating priests and religious experiencing mental health problems.

In my formation years (1963-1971), the subject of sexual orientation was never talked about. I recall a fellow student giving me a novel of James Baldwin's to read. In hindsight, he was probably telling me more than that it was a novel worth reading. By the 1980s the situation changed somewhat. Father C, one of those interviewed in John Weaver's book, *Thirty-Three Good Men* describes estimates that 'well over half' his class were gay. The subject matter was never touched upon by the seminary authorities and only rarely by students. 'It was as if homosexuality would cease to exist if it wasn't discussed.'<sup>2</sup>

I encountered a different situation when I lived in a formation

1 Raphael Gallagher. 'The Great Silence.' *The Furrow* 2004, 135.

2 John A. Weaver. *Thirty-three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity.* Dublin: Columba Press 2014 121

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house in the United States in the early 90s. As a heterosexual, I was in the minority. The culture of the house was different from what I had been used to; movies rather than sport was the preferred topic of conversation. Sexual orientation was acknowledged but not openly discussed. The candidates did not feel the need to hide their sexual orientation but I could see that some were struggling to integrate it into their religious identity. I returned to Ireland in 1993. I was asked to give a series of workshops on celibacy and sexuality in a seminary to a group preparing for diaconate. I addressed the topic of sexual orientation and posed the question: If you were gay would you feel safe disclosing your sexual orientation to others? The answer was always 'No' with one qualification, that they would consider making such a disclosure to their spiritual director. This response reflects the culture of fear that existed in many seminaries and houses of formation in the 60s, 70s and 80s where candidates spent a great deal of their energies 'hiding.' It impacted on gay candidates more than others. It was risky for candidates to acknowledge their sexual orientation and almost difficult for them to 'feel good about it.' On the other hand I have spoken with some gay priests who assured me that in the 90s their experience of acceptance and safety was more positive.

Since the 1970s there has not been the same decline in gay candidates entering the seminary as there has been in heterosexual candidates with the result that the ratio of gay to heterosexual seminarians has risen considerably. We have now reached a situation where in some countries in the Western world the majority of candidates may be gay. There has been a corresponding change among priests. The situation varies from country to country. Thomas G. Plante, reporting on the situation in the United States, reports that research from a variety of sources suggests that somewhere between 25% and 45% of priests are homosexual in orientation.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to point out that since 5% of Americans may be homosexual, the proportion of priests who are homosexual is at least five times larger than the national average for men.

The growing acknowledgment of this development caused alarm bells to ring in the Vatican and other places. In November 2005 the Congregation for Catholic Education published an '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 Holy Orders.' The document made it clear that candidates 'who practise homosexuality, who present profoundly deep-rooted homosexual tendencies or support

3 Thomas G. Plante 'Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis 2002-2012' (Plante, Thomas G & McChesney, Kathleen L. eds.) Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Pub. 2012, 200

so-called gay culture' could not be admitted to the seminary or ordained as priests. It goes on to say that spiritual directors and confessors have a duty to dissuade such persons from proceeding to ordination.<sup>4</sup> Put yourself in the place of the spiritual directors and confessors. How are they to interpret the phrase 'deep-rooted homosexual tendencies'? What is the difference between deep-rooted homosexual tendencies and deep-rooted heterosexual tendencies? Could they not both be consistent with a high level of affective maturity where one's sexual orientation is integrated into the many dimensions of the self?<sup>5</sup> The document reflects the ambivalent stance of Church authorities to homosexuals in the priesthood; they are there but they are not supposed to be there. This has its roots in the Catholic teaching that homosexual acts are 'intrinsically disordered'.

An honest response to the situation requires that this ambivalence be addressed. A case can be made for seminary rectors and presidents openly declaring that sexual orientation, homosexual or heterosexual, is not a barrier to ordination. The critical factor is whether candidates have the maturity to commit themselves to living a chaste celibate lifestyle and whether they have integrated their sexual orientation to support such a commitment. Of course, activities such as putting one's details on a gay website are incompatible with such a commitment, as is going on a heterosexual dating site.

The question can be asked: Are Catholics prejudiced against homosexuals? Research on this topic indicates that Catholics are more prejudiced towards homosexuals than they are towards black people. The explanation given is that while black people are tolerated by the religious subculture, homosexuality is condemned and so Catholics may feel justified to engage in discriminatory attitudes and behaviour.<sup>6</sup> During the height of the sexual abuse crisis high ranking Vatican officials, notably Cardinal Bertone, tried to blame the crisis on the presence of homosexuals in the priesthood. There is a subtler prejudice that is much less obvious and for that reason we don't readily admit to. It is an assumption we make. When we learn that someone is homosexual we immediately assume that they are sexually active. We don't make a similar assumption with regard to heterosexuals. I have spoken with homosexuals committed to living a celibate lifestyle and they

4 Congregation for Catholic Education. *Vatican Instruction: Priesthood Candidates and Homosexuality*. Origins Vol 35, No 26. 2005, 431

5 Lief Noll. 'A Psychologist Response to the Vatican Instruction on Homosexuality.' *Human Development* Vol 27, No 1. Spring 2006, 11

6 Fulton, Aubyn S. Gorsuch, Richard L. & Maynard, Elizabeth A. 'Religious Orientation, Antihomosexual Sentiment and Fundamentalism Among Christians.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1999, 30 (1) p. 15.

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find this assumption offensive. They can feel inhibited entering a discussion on sexual orientation because they are immediately put on the defensive. Gay clerics and religious report that they experience a growing acceptance of differences with regard to their sexual orientation from fellow clerics and religious. However, because there is a marked reluctance to discuss the issue, it has assumed the status of the elephant in the room. Some gay priests and religious were struck by the lack of awareness among fellow priests and religious regarding the *LGBT* people leading up to the marriage referendum. It is felt by these priests that many of the clergy and bishops have never sat down and had a really good heart to heart talk with men and women who are gay.

There is a widespread impression that the Catholic Church is unwelcoming to gay and lesbian persons. This impression is based on Church teaching and on occasions in the past when Church leadership failed to engage with this group. At one level the Church's practice seems contradictory. It condemns homosexual acts yet, it readily ordains gay men as deacons, priests and bishops in increasing numbers. Their orientation does not invalidate their ordination. The ambiguity I spoke about is evident in that the Church would seem to be reluctant to acknowledge this fact. What is the basis for that reluctance?

I was impressed recently by the statement coming from Archbishop Welby following the disclosure that the Bishop of Grantham, Nicholas Chamberlain, was in a longstanding celibate relationship. The statement reads: 'His appointment as bishop of Grantham was made on the basis of his skills and calling to serve the church – he lives within the bishops' guidelines and his sexuality is completely irrelevant to his office.'<sup>7</sup> I can't imagine the Catholic Church in Ireland making such a statement. It lacks the clarity and freedom necessary to make it because it is still stuck in the ambivalence I referred to.

One's response to a problem is shaped by how one conceives the nature of the problem. Einstein is credited with saying that if he had one hour to save the world, he would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and five minutes finding the solution.<sup>8</sup> I expect that readers of this article are familiar with the recent concerns expressed about the presence of a gay sub-culture in seminaries. There is a danger that these concerns will give rise to a reactive response on the part of Church authorities while ignoring the wider question of the overall culture that prevails in the seminary itself. A healthy seminary culture is one that fosters an environment

<sup>7</sup> *Guardian* 3/9/2016

<sup>8</sup> Kegan, Robert & Laskow Lahey, Lisa. *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*. Boston Mass.: Harvard Business School 2016, 220

conducive to the spiritual and psychological development of seminarians. The culture would seem to be problematic when fear and lack of trust begin to dominate. Legitimate differences with regard to sexual orientation, spirituality and understanding of priesthood do not seem to be respected. A healthy seminary environment provides a safe space where students can give and receive feedback from one another and their formators.

*The Tablet* gave the following headline to an article reporting on the steps taken by the trustees: *Maynooth introduces new measures to win back trust.*<sup>9</sup> I find myself asking the question: the trust of whom? The wider Catholic population, benefactors and parents of seminarians or the level of trust in the fractured seminary community? If the seminary is to be fit for purpose the latter needs urgent attention. Mary McAleese told a summer school that Irish seminaries should be 'gay friendly.' I have a certain hesitancy about using that phrase because it can easily be misinterpreted where *friendly* could be misinterpreted to mean *favouring*. Seminaries should be welcoming of all sexual orientations and striving to create a community where differences are respected. I recall a discussion I had with the Rector William Slattery when I worked in the seminary in South Africa. I asked him about his philosophy for running a seminary. He told me his first option was to try and create a pastoral atmosphere where students were loved and accepted. If that didn't work, he would consider the second option of ruling by fear. This was during the apartheid years when prejudice was socially approved and institutionalized. Ours was a multi-racial seminary and not immune to the divisions and discrimination of the wider society. I am proud to say that the Rector was relatively successful in what he set out to do. I learned an important lesson then; a seminary is successful because of its culture.

#### PASTORAL INITIATIVES

For an organization with a significant proportion of gay men and women in leadership positions, I find it puzzling that in the Irish Catholic Church there is not more evidence of pastoral outreach to the gay and lesbian community. I wonder why this is the case. Has it to do with the reluctance of gay priests to be seen to be involved in this ministry? Are they afraid that such a step might be interpreted as a *coming out* on their part? My first experience of a pastoral reaching out to the gay community was in the mid-70s in Dublin. A group of priests and lay people organized a monthly Eucharist for gay people in a private oratory on a Sunday evening. A confrère was one of the organizers. I recall answering the phone one Sunday afternoon and the caller was David Norris. He was

9 *The Tablet*. 3/9/2016

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ringing up to wish the venture well. Another initiative I am aware of involved gay religious setting up a support group for people who wished to explore their Catholic and gay identity. While these pastoral initiatives are laudable, it is regrettable that the reflections and wisdom generated in such groups have not been taken up by the wider Catholic community. If this had happened, we would not be so disconnected as we are today.

### COMING OUT

Let me state the obvious; there are different levels of coming out. Pastoral involvement is one of the ways chosen by gay priests and religious to come out. It has certain advantages in that the level of self-exposure is contained. In my experience the most favoured way is for a gay person to tell me details about their personal and professional life that indicate they might be gay, but I am left to draw my own conclusions. While I was in religious life this was a frequent occurrence. This indirect approach works well in relationship with friends and confrères but I have certain misgivings in regard to siblings, parents and family members. I recall a conversation with siblings of a gay priest who died without telling them the full story. Their sense of loss was added to by the fact that they had missed out on the opportunity to respond to a full disclosure if he had chosen to take that step. While coming out to friends can be a healing experience I believe that disclosure to parents or siblings has added potential for healing because of the nature of those relationships. With regard to seminarians, I would hope that before ordination day they would have found the courage to come out to at least one member of their family and experienced their acceptance. Sadly, one needs to allow for the fact that this outcome cannot always be guaranteed.

I have a distinct memory of a summer in the mid-80s when I received a phone-call from a confrere suggesting that we meet for a pint. He was home on holidays from the 'missions'. We met in a pub near Heuston Station. He told me that he considered me a friend and that he wanted to let me know he was gay before he went back to his mission. I was deeply touched by his self-disclosure and somewhat shocked as I didn't suspect it. I can't recall the details of my response. I would like to think that I ordered another pint for us both to celebrate a friendship sealed. Our paths never crossed again and he died some years later. On balance, it may be more appropriate to disclose when the relationship is a friendship rather than pastoral. I recall a conversation with a gay priest friend who described for me that loneliness he felt at not being able to disclose this significant dimension of himself to parishioners whom he had grown to know and love.

## CELIBACY

I have purposely kept my focus on sexual orientation rather than on celibacy though both are intimately connected. A priest's ability to live a healthy and committed celibate lifestyle will largely depend on how well he is able to accept and feel good about his sexual orientation. Furthermore, it will depend on the quality of his support relationships as he lives out this commitment. Just as ambivalence marks the Church's stance to homosexuality, it also marks its stance to celibacy. John Weaver in his study already cited speaks of acceptance of celibacy among priests as best 'portrayed on a continuum, ranging from complete acceptance to total rejection, with most priests in the middle.'<sup>10</sup> This would seem to indicate a high level of ambivalence among homosexual and heterosexual clergy regarding celibacy. The Amárach survey commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests in 2012 found that 87 per cent of Irish Catholics believed that priests should be allowed to marry. This indicates a low level of support for mandatory celibacy among the laity. Incidentally, the same survey indicated that some 61 per cent of Catholics disagree with the Church's teaching on homosexuality.<sup>11</sup> These statistics indicate that among Catholics there is a marked difference between their personal views and the official Church's stance on homosexuality and compulsory celibacy. It is not surprising then that these differences should be reflected among the students in the national seminary. The seminary can't be understood in isolation from what is going on in society and the Church. The comments made in the wake of the controversy during the summer failed to appreciate this truth.

In the late 80s when I worked in the seminary in South Africa I was responsible for giving input to seminarians on living a celibate lifestyle. At the time, I thought I was doing a good job. Now I must admit that my reflections on living a chaste celibate life were based exclusively on a heterosexual perspective. Of course, I knew there were gay students in the seminary; however, their experience and concerns around living a chaste celibate life did not enter into my reckoning. I wonder did I at some level believe that they shouldn't be there?

I hope I have said enough to show that we cannot go on in our dioceses, religious communities and seminaries assuming that we don't have a significant number of brothers and sisters who are gay and lesbian. A failure to find creative ways of responding to this new and emerging development will mean that our claiming to be a community of brothers and sisters where all are cherished equally is in danger of becoming a charade. This has particular relevance

<sup>10</sup> Weaver op.cit. 2014, 129

<sup>11</sup> *The Irish Times* 13/04/2012



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for seminaries and houses of formation. I consider the candidates there a 'protected species.' Staff need to pay particular attention to creating an environment that is accepting of the candidate in all the dimensions of his or her life. This means creating a space where it is safe for people to be themselves, to be vulnerable and to be challenged. All are learners and there are big issues to talk about.

**Irish death-notices.** Irish death notices are an interesting social study. I can recommend it to the twenty- and thirty-somethings. It might smarten them up a bit about the social history of Ireland. One can play a game of guessing what part of the country the deceased is from just by reading the surname. There aren't too many McGinleys in Kerry or McGillicuddys in Donegal. This is beginning to change with more social mobility, and the first exotic Eastern European names have made an appearance. A study of the dramatically different first names of the generations can be a fun exercise. Granny Teresa is often the mother of Paddy and Eileen but she's almost a dead cert to be the granny of Sharon and Karen, and maybe even the great-gran of Jack, Chloe and Sophie. Try it. It's uncanny.

— RITA LARKIN, *Death and the Irish*, ed. Salvador Ryan (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd.) p.264.