

# Banning Gays from the Priesthood

## A View from Pope Benedict XVI

The following article was written by Jeff Israely of Time Magazine. It illustrates the conservative direction the Church of Rome may be taking under the leadership of its new Pontiff.



Among the most severe words issued from the Vatican in recent memory were written by then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, just a month before he became Pope Benedict XVI. Tucked into the Good Friday meditations for the Way of the Cross ceremony at the Coliseum was a phrase whose bluntness caught many in Rome that evening off guard: "How much filth there is in the Church," he wrote, "and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!" Since becoming Pope in April, Benedict has not yet explained the nature of the "filth" to which he referred. Still, most Catholic Church observers are now convinced that Cardinal Ratzinger, who as the head of the Vatican doctrinal office had been apprised of some of the most heinous cases of clerical sex abuse, was referring to the scandals that have shaken the Church in the United States and elsewhere in recent years.

Reports this week that the Vatican is preparing to release a new document barring gays from joining the priesthood may be an indication that the new pope is still making a priority of putting the priestly house in order. Gay priests and others argue that there is no direct link between homosexuality and pedophilia, noting that the majority of offenders are heterosexuals. But conservative Catholics point out that the vast majority of victims of abusive priests are boys, and complain that the prevalence of gay seminarians is creating an environment that turns heterosexuals away from the priesthood.

There is already a Vatican document in force, the 1961 text "Instruction on the Careful Selection and Training of Candidates for the States of Perfection and Sacred Orders," that appears to explicitly exclude the ordination of homosexuals, even if they are committed to vows of celibacy. If Benedict signs off on this updated and explicit reaffirmation of these standing rules, it would be a sign that he believes they are not being followed. In fact, some U.S. seminaries have operated with a sort of "don't ask/don't tell" approach to the sexual orientation of those entering the priesthood. The Vatican is also set to start a comprehensive review of American seminaries, that will investigate how these questions have been addressed.

A new Congregation of Catholic Education document with such an explicit prohibition, one that had languished in John Paul II's final years, would be a clear sign of the new Pope's priorities. Some Catholics fear a document of that nature may debilitate a Church already facing a shortage of priests, and might even spark a witch hunt of already ordained gay priests (who should not be affected by the text currently under consideration). Nevertheless, some Catholics don't expect the document will invoke a blanket ban. Among those who believe that reports of the most draconian version have not originated "from a responsible party" is Father Richard John Neuhaus, the editor of the journal *First Things* who is influential among the circle of religious conservatives who support President George Bush. Neuhaus, who has close contacts in the Vatican, distinguishes between active homosexuals who embrace an identity as gay and those "who experience homoerotic desires but through spiritual discipline and the grace of God have those desires under control." The new document, says Neuhaus, has been in the works at least two or three years and "will not be that kind of flat unqualified prohibition of ordaining to the priesthood someone who has successfully coped with homoerotic desires." Such a nuance, however, may not stand up in the quiet offices of the Vatican to the loud canonade of Ratzinger's Good Friday sermon and the procrastinations of the last papacy may soon be giving way to the theological certainties of Pope Benedict XVI.