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# Blunt questions on sex before a life of chastity

**U.S. Catholic seminaries struggle to draw line on gays and the priesthood**

BY PAUL VITELLO

Every job interview has its awkward moments, but in recent years, the standard interview for U.S. men seeking a life in the Roman Catholic priesthood has made the awkward moment a requirement.

"When was the last time you had sex?" all candidates for the seminary are asked. (The preferred answer: not for three years or more.)

"What kind of sexual experiences have you had?" is another common question. "Do you like pornography?"

Depending on the replies, and the results of standardized psychological tests, the interview may proceed into deeper waters: "Do you like children?" and "Do you like children more than you like people your own age?"

It is part of a soul-baring obstacle course prospective seminarians are forced to run in the aftermath of a sexual abuse crisis that church leaders have decided to confront, in part, by scrubbing their academies of potential molesters, according to church officials and psychologists who screen candidates in the United States.

But many of the questions are also aimed at another, equally sensitive mission: deciding whether gay applicants should be denied admission under complex recent guidelines from the Vatican that do not explicitly bar all gay candidates but would exclude most of them, even some who are celibate.

Scientific studies have found no link between sexual orientation and abuse, and the church is careful to describe its two initiatives as more or less separate. One top adviser to U.S. seminaries characterized them as "two circles that might overlap here and there."

Still, since the abuse crisis erupted in 2002, curtailing the entry of gay men into the priesthood has become one of the church's highest priorities. And that task has fallen to seminary directors and a cadre of psychologists who say that culling candidates has become an arduous process of testing, interviewing and making decisions — based on social science, church dogma and gut instinct.

"The best way I can put it, it's not black and white," said the adviser, the

Rev. David Toups, the director of the secretariat of clergy, consecrated life and vocations of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "It's more like one of those things where it's hard to define, but I know it when I see it."

Concern over gay men in the priesthood has simmered in the church for centuries and has been heightened in recent years by claims from some Catholic scholars that between 25 percent and 50 percent of priests in the United States are gay. The church has never conducted its own survey, but other experts have estimated the number to be far smaller.

The sexual abuse scandal has prompted some conservative bishops to lay blame for the crisis on a "homosexual subculture" in the priesthood. While no one has proposed expelling gay priests, the crisis has pitted those traditionalists against other Catholics who attribute the problem to priests, gay and straight, with dysfunctional personalities.

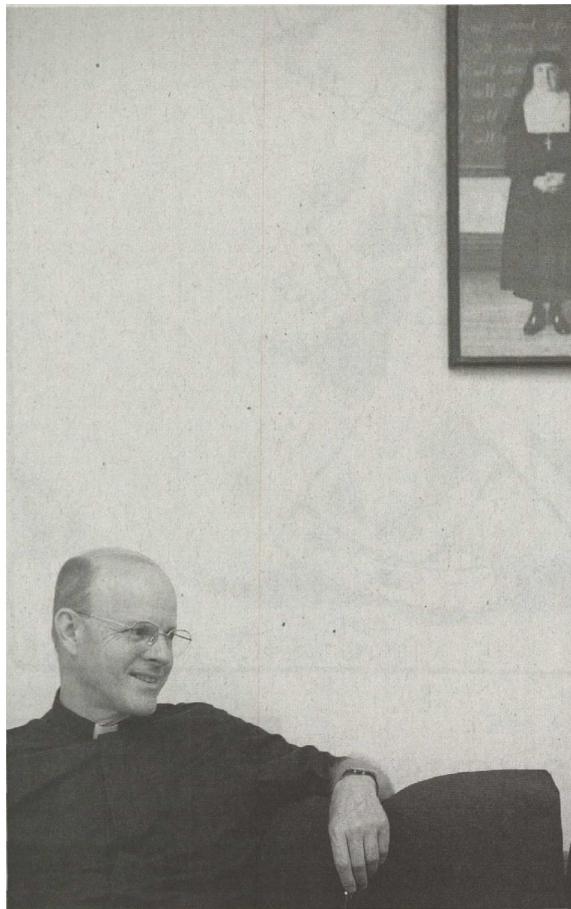
In 2005, the Vatican sidestepped that ideological debate but seemed to appease conservatives by issuing guidelines that would strictly limit the admission of gay men to Catholic seminaries.

The guidelines, which bolstered existing rules that had been widely unenforced, defined homosexuality in both clear-cut and ambiguous ways: Men who actively "practice homosexuality" should be barred. But seminary rectors were left to discern the meaning of less obvious instructions to reject candidates who "show profoundly deep-rooted homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called gay culture."

Though some Catholics saw room in that language for admitting celibate gay men, the Vatican followed up in 2008 with a clarification. "It is not enough to be sure that he is capable of abstaining from genital activity," ruled the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, which issued the initial guidelines. "It is also necessary to evaluate his sexual orientation."

Some seminary directors were baffled by the word "orientation," said Thomas G. Plante, a psychologist and the director of the Spirituality and Health Institute at Santa Clara University, who screens seminary candidates for several dioceses in California and nationwide.

Could a psychologically mature gay person, committed to celibacy, never become a priest? Dr. Plante said several admissions officers asked. Could the



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church afford to turn away good candidates in the midst of a critical priest shortage?

The Vatican permits every bishop and leader of a religious order to make those decisions, which vary from stricter to more liberal interpretations of the rules. But the methods of reaching them have

become increasingly standard, experts say.

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, a psychologist at the Catholic University of America in Washington who has screened seminarians and once headed a treatment center for abusive priests, said the screening could be "very intrusive."

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But he added, "We are looking for two basic qualities: the absence of pathology and the presence of health."

To that end, most candidates are likely to be asked not only about past sexual activities but also about masturbation fantasies, consumption of alcohol, relationships with parents and the causes of romantic breakups. All must take H.I.V. tests and complete written exams like the 567-question Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, which screens for, among other things, depression, paranoia and gender confusion. In another test, candidates must submit sketches of anatomically correct human figures.

The church views gay sex as a sin and homosexual tendencies as a psychological disorder, but it does not bar chaste gay men from participating in the sacraments. That degree of acceptance does not extend to ordination.

"Whether he is celibate or not, the person who views himself as a 'homo-

**Complex recent guidelines from the Vatican do not explicitly bar all gay candidates but would exclude most, even some who are celibate.**

sexual person,' rather than as a person called to be a spiritual father — that person should not be a priest," said Father Toups, of the bishops' conference.

Beyond his assertion that "I know it when I see it," no one interviewed for this article was able to describe exactly how screeners or seminary directors determined whether someone's sexual orientation defined him.

Some Catholics have expressed fear that such vagueness leads to bias and arbitrariness. Others call it a distraction from the more important objective of finding good, emotionally healthy priests.

"A criterion like this may not ensure that you are getting the best candidates," said Mark D. Jordan, the R.R. Niebuhr professor at Harvard Divinity School, who has studied homosexuality in the Catholic priesthood. "Though it might get you people who lie or who are so confused they do not really know who they are."

"And not the least irony here," he added, "is that these new regulations are being enforced in many cases by seminary directors who are themselves gay."