

Misogynist? Homophobic? We've got the church for you!

Jamie Manson | Oct. 22, 2009

On Friday, Oct. 16 the most e-mailed article on *The New York Times* Web site was the story of Pat Bond's fight to receive financial support for the terminally ill son that she conceived with a Franciscan priest over 20 years ago.

Four days later, the eighth most e-mailed *Times* article told of the Pope's new initiative to welcome larger numbers of Anglican priests and seminarians, regardless of marital status, into the Roman Catholic clergy.

The Pontiff is putting this plan into practice in an attempt to offer a spiritual home to those who have either left or are considering leaving the Anglican Communion because of their opposition to the ordination of women and openly-gay priests as well as the blessing of same-sex unions.

Ms. Bond, who was impregnated and abandoned by a Catholic priest, cannot get funding for her son's brain cancer treatments. The priest receives little disciplining from his superiors. She is told by the Franciscan order, who never encouraged the priest to leave the ministry, that they have already gone "far beyond what the law would require," in their financial support. They also reminded her that, by speaking publicly, she is in jeopardy of paying a penalty because she is in violation of a confidentiality agreement that she signed years ago.

Married Anglican priests and seminarians are provided with their own sacred structure, called "personal ordinariates," to enhance their spiritual care and guidance. They earned this special privilege by being vociferously misogynist and homophobic.

A woman is punished by Catholic superiors for her relationship with a priest, while married Anglican priests who are anti-woman and anti-gay are welcomed more fully into the Catholic clerical fold.

This week the Catholic church seems to have reached another low point in its perennial war on sex. However, in this latest twist of events, one form of sexual activity has been legitimized: married sex between male Anglican priests and their spouses who have reached qualifying levels of misogyny and homophobia.

Ironically, it was Gene Robinson -- whose courageous assent to the bishop's seat in the Episcopal church first elicited the Anglican firestorm and threat of schism over the ordination of out gays and lesbians -- who first showed me that the relationship between misogyny and homophobia runs deep. Several years ago I heard him offer a lecture at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. At one point in his talk, he addressed his sorrow at the lack of support that some gay men have for women in their own fight for fair and equal treatment in the church. He asked the audience, "When will we gay men realize that the reason the church hates us is because they hated women first? The hatred of gay men is rooted in the original hatred of women and the feminine."

These new developments at the Vatican might be slightly more digestible if studies proved that the Catholic church is being led by a primarily heterosexual, celibate clergy. Unfortunately, they prove the contrary.

According to the *Times* article on Ms. Bond, "A landmark study in 1990 by the scholar A. W. Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine, found that 20 percent of Catholic priests were involved in continuing sexual relationships with women, and an additional 8 percent to 10 percent had occasional heterosexual relationships."

Fr. Donald Cozzens, an author, psychologist, and former Catholic seminary president, estimates in his book, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, that 50 percent of Roman Catholic priests have a homosexual orientation. He adds, "Beyond these estimates, of course, are priests who remain confused about their orientation and men who have so successfully denied their orientation, that in spite of predominately same-sex erotic fantasies, they insist that they are heterosexual."

Given these statistics, one must wonder if these latest conflicts over sexuality are just further evidence of church authorities' conflicts over their own sexual desires and activities. Is this latest move yet another desperate attempt to maintain a closed, closeted, clerical "old boys network," where no man is threatened with the possibility of having to speak openly and honestly about sexuality, desire, and relationships of integrity?

Some church leaders might have us believe that the lesbian and gay issue is the only real sexuality "crisis" facing the church. But it is important to remember that this is but one petition in an increasingly long prayer list: contraception, abortion, pedophilia, sexual abuse, and perhaps the most egregiously overlooked sexual issue, the mistreatment and exclusion of women.

The intensity of alarm over same-sex relations and their polarizing, if not schismatic, power may be evidence that the root cause of all of this concern is deeper than homosexuality. The cause of this controversy may very well be rooted in the church's struggle with sexuality itself -- a struggle that, allegorically at least, was born in the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve.

While many have interpreted the Adam and Eve story as a chronicle of birth, life and death, a closer reading also reveals that it is an account of the beginning of our shame towards our sexuality. Before taking the fruit, the man and the woman are said to be naked and unashamed. After realizing their nakedness, they hide from God, mistakenly convinced that God, too, will be embarrassed by their exposed genitals. When God realizes that they are hiding because they are ashamed of their nakedness, God is angry and, with a heavy heart, makes Adam and Eve clothes and expels them from the garden. Shame was not the response that God wanted us to have to our nakedness and our sexuality.

In its treatment of Pat Bond and its overtures to conservative Anglican priests, the church has exacerbated the culture of shame that has long compelled Catholics to hide from their sexualities. Unfortunately for misogynist and homophobic church authorities, most Western Catholic and mainline Protestants have come to understand another great biblical truth: by their fruits you shall know them.

In its latest moves, the church has only further alienated itself from those who are seeking healthy, life-giving, and honest expressions of their sexuality rather than the harmful, secretive affairs that estrange us from ourselves, from one another, and from God. The new generations of Catholics will not have inherited the church's reign of sexual guilt that marked those who grew up Catholic 40 or more years ago. Until the church authorities begin to deal with our human, God-given sexuality in ways that propel us towards growth and greater wholeness, the relevance of the Vatican's teaching authority will only continue to dwindle within the generations to come.

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