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Praise for report on gay priests and sex abuse

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Nov. 20, 2009

BALTIMORE -- Gay Catholics and victims of clergy sexual abuse are hailing preliminary results of a study commissioned by U.S. Catholic bishops that says gay priests are no more likely than straight clergy to sexually abuse minors.

Still, some bishops gathered here Nov. 16-18 for their semi-annual meeting said it is premature to say whether the church leaders who had asserted such a link were wrong.

Researchers from New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice on Tuesday (Nov. 17) presented initial findings from their multi-year study of the clergy sexual abuse scandal, which has resulted in some 14,000 claims of abuse and cost the U.S. Catholic Church about $2.6 billion in settlements since 1950.

The study, which is due to be completed next year, was commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops after the scandal overtook the U.S. church in 2002.

In a presentation to the bishops Nov. 17, Margaret Smith of John Jay said: "What we are suggesting is that the idea of sexual identity be separated from the problem of sexual abuse. At this point, we do not find a connection between homosexual identity and the increased likelihood of subsequent abuse from the data that we have right now."

Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of the gay Catholic group DignityUSA, called the report "very welcome news for gay people, gay priests, and our families and friends."

She said the John Jay report confirms other studies in concluding that sexual orientation is not connected to pedophilia or other sex crimes. "We hope that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church will finally accept this finding, since it has been borne out through their own study," Duddy-Burke said.

Some bishops, however, said it is too early to draw conclusions about the researchers' findings.

"I wouldn't put a lot of credence in it," said Archbishop John Nienstedt of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

After the abuse crisis rocked the church in 2002, Nienstedt helped lead a Vatican investigation of U.S. seminaries aimed at rooting out homosexuality, and served on a committee that drew up new sex abuse prevention policies for U.S. dioceses. He has also written that homosexual orientation is the result of childhood trauma.

Smith and her co-author, Karen Terry, stressed Nov. 17 that access to young boys, rather than a homosexual orientation, was largely responsible for the high percentage of male abuse cases. "It's important to separate the sexual identity and the behavior," Terry said. "Someone can commit sexual acts that might be of a homosexual nature but not have a homosexual identity."

Still, Nienstedt said "a priest has to be accessible to all his people, and someone with a strong same-sex attraction would not be good to have in the pastoral care of people."

Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston said Nov. 18 that the researchers' conclusions still "need to be teased out."

"I think it needs to be explained better then it was," he said. "I think that's why you saw some of the bishops challenge (the researchers)."

In 2005, the Vatican issued new guidelines barring men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" from the priesthood. Bishop Edward Braxton of Belleville, Ill., asked Smith and Terry Nov. 17 whether homosexuality should continue to be a factor in excluding some clergy candidates.

"If that exclusion were based on the fact that that person would be more probable than any other candidate to abuse, we do not find that at this time," Smith responded.

But the view that gay men are largely responsible for the sexual abuse scandal pervades the church hierarchy, said David Gibson, a Catholic journalist and author, and will not necessarily be overcome by the John Jay study.

"I think it will give cover to the bishops who want to continue to admit gay men into the seminary, as I think a majority of them want to do," Gibson said. "For those bishops dead-set against having any homosexuals in the priesthood, it won't make a difference."

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said that "the fixation on gay priests" as the cause of the sex scandal "is part of a long litany of simplistic, wrong-headed solutions and scape-goating," by the Catholic hierarchy.

"Sadly, many Catholics have already reached that conclusion though, due to the bishops' spin," Clohessy said. "The real issue continues to be the bishops' bad behavior."

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