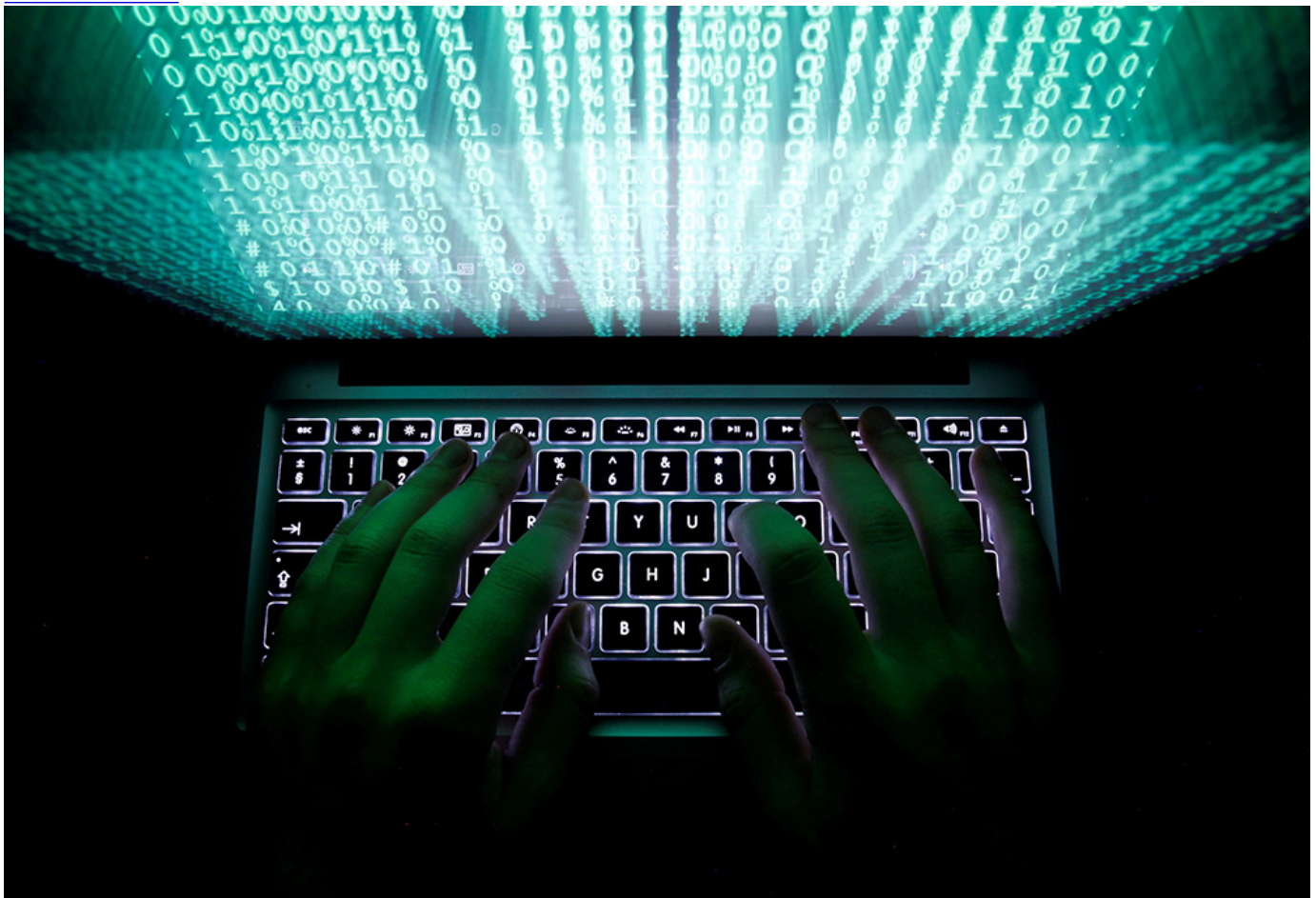


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A man types on a computer keyboard in this illustration photo. (CNS/Reuters/Kacper Pempel)



by Michael Sean Winters

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March 10, 2023

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The Washington Post [reported](#) yesterday that a nonprofit group in Colorado, Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal, "spent millions of dollars to buy mobile app tracking data that identified priests who used gay dating and hookup apps and then shared it with bishops around the country."

That's right. They are spying on priests to make sure they keep it in their pants.

Hard to know where to reach for the proximate analogy. As I read the article, my mind raced to thoughts of the Salem witch trials when other Christians, for reasons difficult to fathom, violated all standards of human decency and justice to pursue a phantom. Midway through the article, the behavior of this group struck as more akin to that of the Stasi and the KGB. The affection some right-wing Catholics have for Valdimir Putin and Viktor Orban suddenly seemed even more sinister. Finally, I thought of the 1950s anti-communist crusade in this country. Cotton Mather, Felix Dzerzhinsky or Joe McCarthy.

Have the culture wars so consumed the Denver conservative Catholic mafia that such villainous analogies spring to mind?

Among those funding the group is the Catholic Foundation of Northern Colorado, "which works in tandem with the Archdiocese of Denver to support its ministries and parishes." The foundation gave \$400,000 over two years. To be clear, that kind of money doesn't normally get spent without the authorization of the archbishop. I wonder what the people in the pews think about their archbishop working with a group that spies on his priests?

[Related: Denver-based Catholic group spent millions to track gay priests, says new report](#)

Jayd Henricks, who formerly served as chief lobbyist for the U.S. bishops' conference, has been involved in this project, as he explained in an article at [First Things](#). Henricks now works at the Augustine Institute in Denver, whose [president](#), Tim Gray, is also on the [board of directors of the Napa Institute](#) along with Francis Maier, another member of the Denver Catholic mafia who is the longtime amanuensis of former Denver (and then Philadelphia) Archbishop Charles Chaput.

Full disclosure: I sometimes worshiped at the same parish as Henricks and we knew each other enough that he accosted me after Mass one day over something I had written. He was part of the effort to align the bishops' conference squarely with the Republican Party.

Henricks begins his column by invoking the scandal surrounding former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick. We now know that McCarrick was a serial abuser and groomer of the young and the vulnerable. What does that have to do with a hookup app?

Henricks writes: "All of us know that limitless connectivity, and boundless access to information and content, can become an instrument of sinfulness, just as easily as it can help build up our society."

Anything human can become "an instrument of sinfulness." Before Grindr there was *Peyton Place* and before that there was *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and before that there were ancient Roman Bacchanalia. So what? Violating people's privacy is sinful too.

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Henricks states "everything we've tried to do as Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal has been collaborative," but it is hard to see how collecting cellphone data, without the permission of those you are spying on, and sending it to bishops is a

collaborative endeavor?

He goes on to state: "It should be noted that these sorts of hookup apps are designed specifically for casual, anonymous sexual encounters — it's not about straight or gay priests and seminarians, it's about behavior that harms everyone involved, at some level and in some way, and is a witness against the ministry of the Church."

Mr. Henricks: You and your ilk are a "witness against the ministry of the Church."

This issue of using data mining to catch priests on hookup apps emerged in July 2021 when the website The Pillar outed [Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill](#), the general secretary of the bishops' conference. The Post states that some of the same people involved in this latest abuse of data collection were involved in that. Back then, a weird — the Post calls it "cryptic" — article appeared in the Catholic News Agency (also based in, you guessed it, Denver) the day before the Burrill story broke, suggesting something along those lines was about to break. Clearly someone was shopping the story around, looking for an outlet with low enough journalistic standards to run it.

**[Read this next: The Pillar investigation of Msgr. Burrill is unethical, homophobic innuendo](#)**

Bennett Cyphers, a special adviser to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights organization, told the Post that the Burrill story "was a character assassination of a private citizen for some kind of political reason based on information [the citizen] didn't know they were being tracked on." The same could be said for this more widespread spying effort.

[Christus Dominus](#), the Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, states:

As those who lead others to perfection, bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special vocation of each. They should also be mindful of their obligation to

give an example of holiness in charity, humility, and simplicity of life (Paragraph 15).

Does spying on priests provide an "example of holiness in charity, humility, and simplicity of life?" That is not only a question for readers of this column. It is a question for the Dicastery for Clergy and the Dicastery for Bishops.

The people involved in this effort to spy on priests are creeps. I would not deny them Communion, to be sure, but I have no hesitation in affirming that they are making the church they claim to love look creepy too.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 31-April 13, 2023** print issue under the headline: Catholic group spying on priests is creepy.