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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com
Phone: 312-372-5111, Ext. 338 ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

PRIESTHOOD CANDIDATES AND HOMOSEXUALITY

November 29 of last year the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, which is responsible for the oversight of seminaries and priestly formation programs, released a document whose full title is *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations With Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Sacred Orders*. Throughout December the mainstream media ran a large number of stories on the instruction and the reactions of various people to it, very few of which inspired confidence that the authors of the stories or the persons they interviewed had a clue as to what they were talking about. As is often the case, anyone wanting to find out what was really going on had to do extra looking and extra reading.

For those who wanted to do the extra work, the best resource available was (is) *Origins*, the documentary service of Catholic News Service, which devoted nearly all of its December 8, 2005 issue to the matter. This issue contains the full text of the instruction, the cover letter that accompanied it, and a number of reactions. Nearly all of what follows in this piece is taken from that source. *Origins* is available to subscribers, but CNS does sell single copies of specific issues for \$5 per copy. Those who wish to obtain a copy of this issue can do so by phoning 202-541-3290 and asking for Volume 35, Number 26 (8 December 2005).

The instruction itself, as Archbishop Chaput notes, *has fewer than 1,500 words. That works out to about an average Sunday homily*. It begins by pointing out that the topic of priestly formation has received extensive treatment since Vatican II, so that there is already an *abundant teaching*, that does not need to be repeated in the instruction. This document simply *contains norms concerning a specific question made more urgent by the current situation, and that is: whether to admit to the seminary and to holy orders candidates who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies*. The phrase *the current situation*, is a reference to the sexual abuse of minors by priests.

The priest does not simply do a job. In his very person he *sacramentally represents Christ, the head, shepherd and spouse of the church*. He makes a gift of his whole person to Christ and Christ's people, which gift then animates his whole life and ministry. To do this, *the candidate...must reach affective maturity. Such maturity will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women, developing in him a true sense of spiritual fatherhood toward the church community that will be entrusted to him*.

The document then briefly reprises the teaching of the church on homosexuality, referring mainly to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. A distinction is made between homosexual acts, which are *grave sins,...intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law, under no circumstances can they be approved*; and homosexual tendencies that a number of men and women have, which *are also objectively disordered and, for those same people, often constitute a trial*. Persons with such tendencies

must be accepted with respect and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided (cf. Catechism, ##2357-58).

Then, answering the question that was presented at the outset, the Congregation states *clearly that the church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called “gay culture.”* Such persons, in fact, find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. With that last sentence, the Congregation’s chain of argument is completed: Candidates for orders must reach affective maturity. Affective maturity is what allows a candidate to relate correctly to both men and women. Men who are practicing homosexuals or who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies or who support the so-called “gay culture” are gravely hindered from relating correctly to men and women. Therefore, they cannot be admitted to the seminary or to holy orders.

The instruction then insists that *homosexual tendencies that were only the expression of a transitory problem – for example, that of an adolescence not yet superseded – make for a very different case.* Such a person could be a candidate for orders. *Nevertheless, such tendencies must be clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate.*

The document’s final section treats the process of vocational discernment and the key players within that process: the bishop or the major superior of a religious order, the rector and those who assist him in the seminary, the candidate’s spiritual director and confessor, and the candidate himself. Special attention is given to the spiritual director, who *represents the church in the internal forum*, and the confessor who, when dealing with a candidate with deep-seated homosexual tendencies, *have the duty to dissuade him in conscience from proceeding toward ordination.*

What about those with such tendencies who are already ordained? The instruction does not address this, but the cover letter does. It states clearly that this document *does not call into question the validity of the ordination and the situation of priests who, in fact, have been ordained with homosexual tendencies or of priests in whom such tendencies have manifested themselves after ordination.* They should remember their promise of celibacy and continue their ministry. However, *because of the particular responsibility of those charged with the formation of future priests, they are not to be appointed as rectors or educators in seminaries.*

Bishop William Skylstad, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in his response to the instruction tried to bridge the language gap between “Vaticanese” and the more commonly used parlance. Most modern discussions of homosexuality use the word “orientation,” which word is not to be found in the instruction nor in the Catechism. Vatican documents use the term “deep-seated homosexual tendencies.” Is this the same as “homosexual orientation”? Bishop Skylstad seems to think that they are equivalent terms, for at one point he paraphrases and expands on a key passage of the instruction: *...It is certainly not acceptable if a candidate practices homosexuality or, whether active or not, if he identifies himself principally by a homosexual inclination or orientation. It is also not acceptable for a candidate to support the “gay culture” and to be so concerned with homosexual issues that he cannot sincerely represent the church’s teaching on sexuality.*

Every priest, Skylstad insists, must be both a teacher and a witness. By virtue of his celibacy, the priest is a witness that *is contrary to the spirit of our times, which often considers personal fulfillment to depend on expressing oneself sexually.* As a teacher, he must be able to *faithfully represent the teaching of the church about sexuality, including the immorality of homosexual genital activity.* It is not enough that the priest be chaste and celibate – he must also teach what the church teaches about sexuality, and he must do so with sincerity and conviction. Skylstad is quite convinced that homosexually inclined men not only can be but are good priests; with God’s grace they serve the Lord and his people, *faithfully representing in word and example the teaching of the church in its fullness, including God’s revelation*

that sexual expression is intended only to take place between a husband and a wife in a loving, faithful and life-giving marriage.

Skylstad's statement is followed by a number of other reactions of varying length. All are interesting. It is not possible to summarize each of them here, but we can mention a few points.

Cardinal George's piece is very short, but brief as it is, it contains two eminently quotable bits. First, after citing the instruction's statement that men cannot be admitted to holy orders if they are practicing homosexuals, have deeply rooted homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called "gay culture," he adds, *In other words, if one's self-identification as a "gay man" is the most important component of a man's personality, he is not a candidate for holy orders.* Thus, the decision a man makes about the role that his homosexual tendencies will have in his understanding of himself is more crucial and determinative than the mere presence of the tendencies. And second, the Cardinal points out that the instruction does not have anything in it that is really new. Its criteria are *entirely consistent with the teaching of the church for the past 2,000 years. To portray the instruction as "gay bashing" or "gay banning" is to misrepresent it.*

Bishop John D'Arcy of Ft. Wayne begins his reaction by acknowledging that the priest is not a man who has a public job that people can be legitimately concerned about and a private life that they have no business in. *The priest calls his people to a life of holiness, and they rightly expect that he himself is living such a life, both in public when they see him and in private when they do not.* He spent fifteen years as a spiritual director in a major seminary, and his experience convinced him that the seminary is no place for practicing homosexuals, supporters of the so-called "gay culture," or those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies. *To be happy, a priest must be convinced in his heart that he would be a good father and a good husband... [the priesthood] cannot be an escape for someone who is afraid of marriage, believed he would not be happy in marriage or would not be a good spouse or father. Giving up a wife and a family is a sacrifice. It's supposed to be a sacrifice. It is not a sacrifice in the same way for a person with deep-seated homosexual tendencies. He is not drawn to marriage in the same way. Thus, immediately, there is a division in the priesthood.* D'Arcy is keenly aware that not all of the priestly formation process is in the hands of the seminary rector and faculty. A large part of the work is done by the candidates themselves, *they will help each other toward the priesthood.* This aspect of priestly formation is compromised where a significant portion of the seminarians have homosexual tendencies – some of the heterosexual students become uncomfortable and choose to leave, and the homosexual students are not really in a place that is fair to them for their own spiritual growth. *In a seminary which, by nature, is somewhat closed, this leads to confusion and turmoil.* As a former spiritual director in a seminary, D'Arcy saves his final words for a priest-critic of the instruction whose objection was *that the spiritual director and confessor might have to talk someone out of becoming a priest. I was a spiritual director for 15 years, and that was precisely the role that one had at times. Not just for this reason, but for many reasons. A spiritual director is not just someone who is only listening and encouraging. He is also confronting and probing, and while observing confidentiality, he often has the obligation to help a person choose another way of life. This is not a violation of spiritual direction, but in seminary it is central to it.*

Father Robert Silva, the president of the National Federation of Priests Councils, appreciates the effort that went into the instruction, but he thinks it leaves us with some unanswered questions. Of these, perhaps the most important is *Does the document mean to say that no homosexual man can be "affectively mature," so that he cannot relate properly to men and women?* The question matters because the instruction insists that "affective maturity" is essential to any candidate for orders. And the question is valid because although the document walks right up to the edge of saying so, it does not take that step. It says that the candidate's affective maturity *will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women,* and a bit later it says that those with deep-seated homosexual tendencies *find themselves in*

a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. “Gravely hinders them” may be close to, but it is not the same as, “prevents them,” and much may hang on what the practical difference is, if there is any. Fr. Silva does not think that any move should be made to implement the instruction until all such questions have been answered, and he begins his statement by affirming those priests who understand themselves to have “homosexual tendencies” and who are living a celibate and holy life. The ministry of these priests is an inestimable gift to the church and of immeasurable value for the people of God.

This is also the belief of Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, who writes that *In the past and currently, priests with a homosexual orientation have exercised their priestly ministry in a chaste, faithful, loving and pastorally effective manner. The Diocese of Albany will continue to assess each candidate on his ability to measure up to all the expectations of an affectively mature person and public minister of the church.*

There are other reactions to be read in this issue of *Origins* – from Archbishop Chaput, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Cardinal McCarrick, and from England, Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor. It is worth the phone call and the five bucks, for as most of the respondents say, the priesthood is an essential part of the church, and so all the members of the church have an interest in this discussion, its progress, and any changes in the seminary system or programs for priestly formation that will result from it.

– Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.

APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter’s Friars Legion.
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*