Opinion

News



"The Musicians," oil on canvas by Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi), 1597 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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I cannot really offer a review of Frédéric Martel's *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy.* A reviewer has an obligation to read every word of a book he is to review, and I could not bring myself to read page after page of such sweeping claims, such salacious gossip, such trafficking in stereotypes. This book is a gossip columnist's pretending to be a writer at The New Yorker, Page 6, posing as an unsuccessful "The Talk of the Town."

How sweeping? He writes in the introduction the NCR regrettably chose to excerpt on Monday:

> By failing to recognize the broadly homosexual dimension, we deprive ourselves of one of the keys to a greater understanding of most of the facts that have stained the history of the Vatican for decades: the secret motivations that led Paul VI to confirm the prohibition on artificial contraception, the rejection of condoms and the strict obligation of celibacy on the priesthood; the war against 'liberation theology'; the scandals of the Vatican Bank in the time of the famous Archbishop Marcinkus (he too was a homosexual); the decision to forbid condoms as a way of battling AIDS, even when the pandemic would lead to more than thirty-five million deaths; the VatiLeaks I and II affairs; the recurrent and often unfathomable misogyny of many cardinals and bishops; the resignation of Benedict XVI; the current rebellion against Pope Francis ...

The prohibition on artificial contraception? Liberation theology? What about the common cold? Isn't there surely a "broadly homosexual dimension" to that, too?

As for the stereotypes, look at the passage just cited. What does an "unfathomable misogyny" have to do with being gay? It is true that there are some gay men who look at the world and see no women or children (and only notice straight men if they are really cute). Martel is apparently one of them. But are gays *all* misogynists? Some? Is there a connection between being gay and being a misogynist?

Elsewhere, he detects that a prelate is gay because of his "perfumed voice." Is that the standard used by journalists in France? The late Michael Novak had an unnaturally high-pitched voice, but he was demonstrably heterosexual. Michael Sam, the first openly gay player in the NFL, had a deep basso voice. So what? King George VI had a lisp. Was he gay?

In the excerpt, Mssr. Martel calls the Sistine Chapel's frescoes "one of the most grandiose scenes of gay culture." I suppose that is one way of looking at them, although I saw them with an art historian who described them rather differently. She was a straight woman but, funny enough, she did not describe the great frescoes as the work of a misogynist.

In analyzing *Amoris Laetitia*, Martel does not wrestle with the many books and articles written about the document and its theology. Instead, he claims there are "three coded references to homosexuality" in *Amoris*. The second is a reference to the "joy of the birth of Saint John the Baptist whom we know to have been painted as effeminate by both Caravaggio and Leonardo da Vinci." Really?? This is analysis?

Elsewhere, he cites a prelate's preference for Leonardo da Vinci as evidence of his being gay. As Timothy Radcliffe noted in The Tablet, "The paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Caravaggio are another code, all homosexuals! But the Queen has the largest collection of Leonardo da Vinci drawings in Britain. What are we to make of that?"

Martel sees gay influence everywhere. He has a whole chapter on Jacques Maritain, the gist of which is this: "To understand the Vatican and the Catholic Church, at the time of Paul VI, or today, Jacques Maritain is a good entry point." Why? "I have gradually understood the importance of this codex, this complex and secret password, a real key to understand *The Closet*. The Maritain code." He mentions in passing that Maritain is the father of Christian democracy, and mentions not at all that Maritain's reading of Thomas Aquinas is critical in understanding how the Second Vatican Council came to many of its conclusions. None of that really matters. The key is that he hung out with gay writers.

Such stereotypes would be denounced as sheer bigotry if they came from a straight man (and would not get reprinted in NCR). Why is Martel given a pass to traffic in them because he is gay? Bigotry is repugnant no matter the source. Fascism under a Quisling or a Laval might have been less repugnant than fascism brought by German

invaders, but it was still fascism.

In addition to the skewed analysis, the text of this book is knee deep in factual mistakes. Martel informs us that he always presented himself as a journalist and that he was assisted in his research by a team of 80 researchers and fixers and translators. Could no one have spotted the many errors of fact that stalk this volume?

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He writes, "You can only visit Domus Sanctae Marthae with special permission, and only on Wednesday and Thursday mornings, between 10 o'clock and midday, when the pope is at St.Peter's." Wrong on every point. I visited the Domus once, without special permission, it was a Sunday afternoon; on Wednesdays the pope is holding a General Audience either in the Paul VI Audience Hall or in the square, but not in St. Peter's; and Thursday the pope is wherever his schedule takes him.

He states that Pope Paul VI was elected in 1962, but the election was in 1963.

Discussing Paul's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Martel writes, "Today, we know from witness statements and archive documents that the prohibition on the pill, and perhaps the other moral condemnations of masturbation, homosexuality and the celibacy of the priesthood, were discussed at length. According to historians, the hard line was held by a minority, but Paul VI took his decision alone, *ex cathedra*." We knew it then: The fact that the commission discussed a range of issues and that the pope sided with the minority did not have to wait until Martel's investigation. And the document was not issued *ex cathedra*.

Martel states, "The reasons that led Sodano (as well as Cardinal Errázuriz, who replaced Sodano as secretary of state in 2006) to protect this paedophile priest remain mysterious." But Cardinal Errázuriz did not replace Sodano as secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone did.

He claims that the appointment of Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, then the archbishop of the military archdiocese, to conduct an investigation of seminaries was "strange" and mentions the accusation made by Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò that O'Brien was gay. What was strange about the appointment? O'Brien had been rector of both the North American College in Rome and St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie

(Yonkers), New York.

He writes of Cardinal Sean O'Malley: "At the age of 74, O'Malley is from another era, and seems barely capable of dealing with cases of this kind: in his '*Testimonianza*', Mgr. Viganò challenges his impartiality; and during a stay in the United States in the summer of 2018, when I asked the cardinal for an interview, his secretary, embarrassed, admitted that 'he doesn't read his emails, he doesn't know how to use the internet and he has no mobile phone'. She suggested sending him a fax." I do not know what the cardinal's secretary did or did not say to Martel, but the cardinal does read emails, does know how to use the internet, and he has a mobile phone.

Martel makes much of the fact that he is not intending to "out" anyone, and so he only outs those prelates who have died. That seems an odd moral calculation, to only mention by name those who are no longer around to defend themselves. Among those Martel names as gay is the late Cardinal William Baum. Martel says he lived with his lover. Baum lived with his longtime assistant Msgr. James Gillen and they were inseparable, and like many people who have worked closely together over many years, Gillen could speak for the cardinal with authority. That was, in fact, his job: If you requested something from the cardinal, and the answer was "no," it was Msgr. Gillen who delivered the bad news. (If the answer was "yes," you got to meet with the cardinal so he could deliver the good news.) Like many prominent men, Baum had need of a lifelong assistant who balanced his personality: Baum was quiet and refined, and Gillen was a bit rough-and-ready in his manner. But I never presumed they were lovers. Their relationship put me in mind of Franklin Roosevelt's with Harry Hopkins, or Woodrow Wilson's with "Colonel" Louis Howe, not Ricky Martin's with Jwan Yosef.

The book is littered with insinuations, but this one particularly caught my eye. Martel writes, "Is Paul VI's gentle secret revealed in broad daylight by the choice of the celibacy of the priesthood? A lot of people think so today." That phrase — "A lot of people think so today" — where have I heard that before? I know. Donald Trump explaining that his inauguration had larger crowds than Barack Obama's, or that the border wall in El Paso decreased crime, or that Hillary Clinton was the candidate who colluded with the Russians. A lot of people think so. This is journalism?

If Martel is wrong about so much, both factual matters and interpretive blinders, why should we believe anything he has to say?

There is a kernel of truth in Martel's essential thesis that some of the most extreme anti-gay prelates are themselves gay, and their vitriol is, for them, a kind of protective armor from suspicions. As a psychological reality, this has been recognized in our culture explicitly at least since about1601 when Shakespeare's Queen Gertrude observed "the lady doth protest too much, methinks." There is no proof here. The fact that Cardinal Raymond Burke likes to dress up in the finery of a pre-conciliar prince and that he is exceedingly anti-gay may or may not be an instance of the phenomenon. The fact that his assistant uses the feminine "elle" in referring to Burke may be evidence of campiness or it may be that his assistant's French may not be the best. Similarly, Martel's attack on Cardinal Gerhard Müller is unsubstantial: Martel bases it on the strength of an overhead conversation in a language Martel does not understand. For Martel, anytime, anywhere, anyone tells him some prelate is gay, he believes it. I should like to play poker with him.

Oddly, Fr. Donald Cozzens has taken the same credulity pills as Martel. His review of this book, published yesterday here at NCR, concludes that reading this book will "leave you breathless." It clearly left Cozzens so. He does not question any of the facts. He does not question the journalistic methods. (Let him in to the poker game, too.) This book seems to confirm some ideas Cozzens has long had from his days as a seminary rector and that is enough to look the other way regarding the books' obvious and multiple flaws? And citing Oscar Wilde — "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power" — what to say? It was a witticism, nothing more. It is not, pardon the expression, Gospel. It certainly is not psychology, although the fact that both Cozens and Martel cite it and highlight is, perhaps, a window into their psychology.

Compare Martel's gossipy and nasty indictments with the sympathetic treatment afforded such men by A.N. Wilson in his marvelous essay I have cited before. Wilson was not only sympathetic, he captured the selflessness of many gay clergy, and those in a church that did not require celibacy of its clergy. Or recall the article on gay seminarians by Hanna Rosin in The Washington Post back in 2002. A former seminarian, a straight guy, who had left seminary in part because of the gay subculture of the seminary, told her that he knew the gay future priests "were the most pastoral" in the place. "They are the ones I would want on my deathbed by my side saying, 'God loves you,' " he said. "Even though I'm bitter they made me leave, I know they're the only ones who can do it." Martel demonstrates no such sympathy. An awareness of good, faithful gay priests would destroy his narrative. So he sticks

to the vicious gossip and insinuations.

I am glad this book is being published for one reason. The Catholic rightwing does not know exactly what to do with it. Consider this essay at LifeSiteNews by Maike Hickson and John-Henry Westen. On the one hand, they like the idea of an exposé of homosexuality in the Vatican and hope to use it to provoke a witch hunt. On the other, Martel's insinuations that some of their heroes are gay — Cardinal Burke, Cardinal Müller and Pope Emeritus Benedict — this they cannot abide. So they pick and choose, endorsing the parts of the book that confirm their bias and rejecting the parts that don't. We might call them cafeteria bigots. They will go wild when they see that Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin sent out this tweet defending the three conservative churchmen.

One of the people Martel interviewed is Fr. Federico Lombardi, the former Vatican spokesman. "All of these accusations of homosexuality are a little excessive," Lombardi told Martel. "Of course there are homosexuals [in the Church], that's obvious. There are even a few who are more obvious than the others. But I refuse to read things that way, and to believe that homosexuality is an explanatory factor." It is a wise observation. But Martel would rather cite Viganò.

That's it. This book is the gay equivalent of a Viganò *testimonianza*. There is just enough truth to catch people's attention, but it is all intermingled with insinuations and what can charitably be called mistakes. Viganò wanted to settle scores. Martel hopes to make a lot of money, even using the occasion of the first global meeting to stamp out sex abuse of minors to launch his book. Both are shameless. Neither is serious.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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