News



The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

wp EXCLUSIVE

Catholic group spent millions on app data that tracked gay priests

A group of philanthropists poured money into a Denver nonprofit that obtained dating and hookup app data and shared it with bishops around the country, a Post investigation has found

By Michelle Boorstein and Heather Kelly
Updated March 9, 2023 at 9:18 a.m. EST | Published March 9, 2023 at 8:52 a.m. EST

A screenshot of The Washington Post article (NCR screenshot)



by Katie Collins Scott

Former Staff Reporter

View Author Profile
kcscott@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 9, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A new report by The Washington Post unearths key information about a Catholic news website's controversial use of mobile app tracking data two years ago to out a high-ranking official at the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference, which led to the priest's resignation.

The March 9 story indicates that a group of conservative Colorado Catholics — who formed a nonprofit called Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal — spent millions of dollars to buy data that identified priests who used hookup and gay dating apps. The group then reportedly shared that data with bishops around the United States.

Currently no U.S. data privacy laws block the sale of mobile app tracking data. The aim of the group, according to tax records cited by The Post, is to "empower the church to carry out its mission" by giving bishops "evidence-based resources" with which to assess and identify weaknesses in priestly formation practices.

In July 2021, hours after Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill resigned as general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic news outlet The Pillar ran a lengthy article alleging the priest had participated in "serial sexual misconduct" by regularly using the gay dating app Grindr and visiting a gay bar and gay bathhouse and spa between 2018 and 2020.

Both in the original Pillar story and the outlet's subsequent response to questions about the ethics of their approach, the editors did not say where the data came from.

The Pillars' founding editors, both canon lawyers, compared their story and data use to The New York Times journalism; The Times had used such data to identify a person near the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 insurrection. But The Times story quoted the man it found and he agreed to his name being used.

The Pillar went on to publish two additional articles alleging the use of hookup apps within clerical residences in the Vatican and in the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. After that, the stories drawing from the app tracking data stopped, reports The Post.

Advertisement

The trustees of Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal, according The Post, are: philanthropists Mark Bauman, a former entertainment company executive and current president of the board of Christ in the City, a nonprofit that trains missionaries; John Martin, co-founder of a large natural gas producer and a finical backer of Amazing Parish, a consulting firm that helps improve parishes; and Tim Reichert, who unsuccessfully ran for Congress last year in Colorado's 7th District as a Republican and who is founder of a consulting firm that employs economists.

The Post says it's not clear what repercussions the project is having on clergy who the data suggests have actively used a hookup or dating app. Other than Burrill, The Post said it knew of no other resignations or terminations tied to the data. It suggested priests may be asked to retire early or kept from promotions but not know the reasons why.

Fr. Bryan Massingale is a gay priest and a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University in New York. He called the actions of Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal "disturbing and reprehensible."

"They are scapegoating gay priests, and homosexuality in general, as the principal threats to the Catholic faith," he said, adding that it is a theme in some traditionalist circles.

"But the reality is that there are many gay men who serve the church with dedication and fidelity," Massingale told NCR. "This group seeks to weaponize human weakness for the sake of an ideology. That is not the way of Jesus."

The anonymous tracking of a gay priest via his phone data ran in stories around the globe in 2021, while LGBTQ advocates, as well as Catholics and journalists, condemned the report as homophobic and morally questionable.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 31-April 13, 2023** print issue under the headline: Denver-based Catholic group spent millions to track gay priests, says new report .