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(Dreamstime/Madartists)

by Francis DeBernardo

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August 19, 2026

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Soon after hosting a four-day New Ways Ministry retreat for gay priests, brothers and deacons, I read the [news](#) about a report from the McGrath Institute for Church

Life at the University of Notre Dame titled "[Do You Know Them to be Worthy?](#)" The July 17 report was subtitled "Twelve Proposals for Bishops, Rectors, Seminary Formation Teams, and Mental Health Professionals in Assessing the Suitability of Men for Holy Orders."

When I read Proposals 11 and 12, which offer a negative view of gay men, I was stunned. I had just been blessed by spending four days with extremely "suitable" men who are dedicated to ministering to their communities, even though many of them have endured a lack of acceptance from church officials and their peers. These two proposals create a cloud of suspicion about gay men in the priesthood that will only increase fear, discourage true vocations, and cause great personal pain. They will also rob the church of many healthy and holy priests.

The report's first mistake is that the topic of gay priests is raised under "Proposals Aimed at Supporting Chastity and Celibacy Formation." That categorization implies that the report views gay men primarily in terms of sex and that their greatest challenge is a tendency to engage in sexual activity.

This framing implies that heterosexual men — all of them — are somehow equipped to integrate their sexuality in healthy ways, while their gay counterparts are not. One need only look at the incidence of sexual compulsion among heterosexual men to know this is not true. Sexual compulsion is an equal opportunity phenomenon.

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After more than 30 years of ministering with gay priests, time and again I have been told by them that their greatest struggle is not with celibacy, but with their inability to be open with their bishops, superiors and parish communities about their identity. Having to remain closeted increases loneliness, isolation and an incapacity to be fully authentic with their communities.

This repression sometimes, but not always, leads to psychological trauma and can result in erratic sexual behavior. But it is not their gay identity that causes these problems.

The cause is their difficulty in being open because of homophobic policies, structures and leaders that prevent them from living honest and authentic lives. The climate of fear about gay candidates' sexuality can easily foster psychological problems that

may make celibacy more difficult to honor. These proposals help to create an atmosphere that breeds exactly what they are trying to avoid.

Proposal 11 states that same-sex attraction "is a difficult topic given both the complexity of same-sex attraction itself, and the multiple layers of discourse — theological, pastoral, psychological — in which this topic necessarily comes packaged."

The question needs to be asked, "Why is homosexuality complex and why is it difficult to discuss?" The wider society has made great advances in recognizing that there is nothing mysterious about gay men. The more public conversations people have had, the easier it has been to discuss the topic. Church leaders can start practicing by talking with gay priests.

"Complexity" implies that only experts can understand an issue. Being gay is not complex but a simple fact of life. It is only the magisterium's abstractions that make it complex. If experts are needed, gay men know best what it feels like to be gay. They are the experts. Yet nothing in this report indicates that gay men were consulted in its preparation.

[Related: New Notre Dame report lists 12 key proposals to improve seminary formation](#)

Had the researchers consulted gay men, they would have found that their interests are manifold. They would have seen that gay men have had to overcome tremendous amounts of fear, oppression, concealment, self-doubt, exclusion and messages that God does not truly love them.

As a result of overcoming these obstacles, they have developed great wells of courage, freedom, truth-telling, confidence, inclusiveness and a deep, often arduously won awareness of God's awesome love of all. Being gay is so much more than sex.

Moreover, the report reveals what little knowledge church officials have about the full lives of gay priests and seminarians. Sadly, the climate of fear created by this and previous documents prevents researchers from being able to collect data about the true reality of gay priests' lives. How rich this report would have been if the authors had such information!

Even sadder is this report shows no awareness of how gay priests continue to work tirelessly to spread the Gospel and to build up the church. Their contributions have been invaluable. Without gay men in the priesthood and the episcopate, the Catholic Church would be greatly diminished. Gay priests should not be marginalized and treated with suspicion. They should be enthusiastically thanked.