

Vatican faces yet another gay priest exposé

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 6, 2010



An image released July 23 shows the cover of the Italian magazine *Panorama*. (AFP/Panorama)

Analysis

Literature about the Vatican already contains a number of popular subgenres, such as papal biographies and potboiler novels (think *Shoes of the Fisherman*). Now an additional category probably should be added to the list, based both on the number of examples and their proven capacity to titillate: the “gay priest exposé.”

A spectacular cover story in late July by the Italian news magazine *Panorama*, containing purported revelations about the highly active sex lives of three gay priests in Rome, offers the most recent case in point. While there’s nothing in the report to suggest these priests have any direct connection to the Vatican, the fact that their shenanigans took place in the pope’s backyard inevitably lends the tale a certain Vatican resonance.

In addition to a written account by an undercover reporter (who claimed to have tagged along behind a “gay accomplice?”), *Panorama* also posted photos and video of what it asserted was a month-long series of gay parties and encounters involving the three priests. A 35-year-old French priest identified as “Fr. Paul” is shown in compromising positions both on the dance floor and in bed, and then wearing clerical vestments while apparently saying Mass.

The magazine’s cover shows a pair of priestly hands grasping a rosary, with the fingernails painted pink, under the headline: “The great nights of gay priests.”

Panorama is Italy’s largest news-weekly, and its account prompted an unusual public statement from the Rome diocese, urging any priest living a “double life” to come forward and leave the priesthood. The diocese also insisted that the vast majority of the 1,300 priests serving in Rome are faithful to their vows. (There are also an estimated 2,000 foreign priests in Rome, most of whom work in the Vatican, study in one of the pontifical universities, or serve in the headquarters of their religious order.)

One of the three priests featured in the *Panorama* account, identified as “Carlo,” asserts that 98 percent of the priests he knows are gay, and that today’s church is divided between an “intransigent” wing, which Carlo says doesn’t want to face reality, and an “evangelical” wing accepting of homosexual priests.

The package has drawn skepticism not just from Vatican officials (some of whom have been quoted in Italian papers suggesting the whole thing is a fake) but also from leading gay rights associations in Italy, who accused the magazine of recycling crass gay stereotypes in an effort to score political points. *Panorama* is part of the media empire of conservative Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose government has been at odds with Italian church leaders in recent months over issues ranging from immigration to Berlusconi's personal morality.

Whatever the merits of the *Panorama* account, it's definitely not *sui generis*. In recent years, periodic "gay priest exposés" have become a standard bit of Vatican coverage -- attracting interest both in the media and around water coolers every time.

Perhaps the earliest example came in April 1992, in a spectacular cover package in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*. It featured the experiences of a young German sociologist named Thomas Migge, who claimed that he had been visiting Rome as a tourist and was shocked when a priest openly propositioned him on the city's familiar 64 bus, which takes visitors to the Vatican.

Based on that experience, Migge said he decided to devote the next year and a half to seeing how many homosexual encounters he could arrange with clergy in the vicinity of the Vatican. His plan was to cruise Roman sites where gays congregated and to place ads in gay periodicals ("Young German priest alone in Rome seeks contact?"). He also mixed with students from the Gregorian University, the largest pontifical university in Rome. Migge would flirt until he was propositioned, and then attempt to engage the cleric in conversation, promising to respect his anonymity.

Over 18 months, Migge claimed to have had 64 such contacts, which he described both in the *Spiegel* article and in his 1993 book *Kann denn Liebe Sünde sein? Gespräche mit homosexuellen Geistlichen* ("Can Love Be Sin? Conversations with Homosexual Clergy").

Migge divided his contacts into three categories:

- "The fast ones," meaning clerics who wanted to have sex quickly and without much conversation, and then to return to the daily life of a man of the church. They seemed to be in denial of the conflict between their behavior and their status.
- "The sensualists," meaning clerics who freely admitted they live in conflict with church teaching, but who seemed relatively untroubled by the contradiction. Migge wrote that they lived on a purely sensual, aesthetic level. Of the 64 contacts Migge claimed to have had, 37 fell into this category.
- "Those in the catacombs," meaning clerics who realized the conflict between their conduct and church teaching, and who privately dissented from that teaching, hoping to press for reform from within.

To this day Migge's account remains the most detailed example of the genre, and it set the template for all other exposés to follow.

In 2000, the prominent Italian Vatican writer Marco Politi published a book-length interview with an unnamed gay priest titled *La confessione* ("The Confession"). Politi updated the account in 2006 under the title of *Io, prete gay* ("I, Gay Priest"). The book described a priest struggling with his identity -- at one point, according to Politi, he considered suicide -- and argued for greater tolerance of homosexuality by church officials.

Perhaps the most spectacular exposé came in October 2007, when the Italian TV program "Exit" broadcast video images from a hidden camera that appeared to show a Vatican official named Msgr. Tommaso Stenico making passes at a young Italian male -- inside his own Vatican apartment, no less.

The young man had posed as a potential "date" in gay-oriented Web sites and chat rooms, eventually filming contacts with three priests using a camera hidden in a backpack.

The priests weren't identified during the broadcast, but it didn't take long to flag Stenico, since the camera showed him and the young man entering an elevator inside one of the office buildings used by the Roman curia, and also showed the outer door of the Congregation for Clergy.

At the time, Stenico was serving as a *capo ufficio*, or "head of the office," in the Congregation for Clergy, with special responsibility for catechesis. When the story broke, Stenico claimed he was only pretending to be gay in order to uncover what he described as plots to damage the church by targeting vulnerable priests with homosexual tendencies. He was nonetheless suspended and sent on extended retreat, and hasn't returned to Vatican service.

Earlier this year another gay scandal rocked the Vatican, this time centering on an alleged homosexual prostitution ring. Wiretaps carried out by Italian police as part of an unrelated corruption probe caught a senior Italian politician apparently discussing gay prostitutes with a Nigerian member of a papal choir. The politician was also a "Gentleman of His Holiness," meaning a ceremonial usher for Vatican events. (The papal gentlemen greet heads of state when they visit the pope.)

In that instance, neither man involved in the scandal was a member of the clergy. Both quickly and quietly lost their Vatican positions after reports of the prostitution ring generated headlines around the world.

When these exposés surface, invariably they generate heated reactions.

Church officials and Catholic apologists of various stripes typically accuse the media of trying to smear the church and/or the papacy. Liberal critics of the Vatican generally charge hypocrisy, arguing that finding actively gay personnel in the Vatican itself illustrates the need for reform in official Catholic sexual morality. Conservatives usually insist that what's needed isn't new teaching but greater discipline, charging that the exposés shed light on a troubling moral laxity in the priesthood, especially regarding homosexuality.

Of course, there are also Catholics who react with basic sang-froid. The only thing such revelations prove, they typically say, is something that mature believers have always understood: Priests are human beings, not angels, and some will always struggle to uphold their vows. In that sense, the discovery that some priests are actively gay, even in the shadow of the Vatican, is a bit akin to the discovery of gambling at Rick's -- any shock is purely for show.

Whatever line of interpretation eventually wins out, one thing seems certain: Since a "gay priest exposé" always seems to find an audience, the *Panorama* package probably won't be the last example.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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