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On changing mandatory celibacy: We must be careful what we wish for

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

For nearly the past week, the media covering the imminent retirement of Benedict XVI has been awash in tales of a gay scandal inside the Vatican. The stories, we were told, were revealed in a 300-page dossier bound in a red (of course!) cover.

Reports about the dossier cleverly mixed in older stories about gay priests skulking around chat rooms, dirty dancing at parties, and jumping out of their lovers' beds just in time to preside at Mass.

These sordid tales were actually told years ago in an expose by Italian journalist Carmelo Abbate and had no direct relationship to the dossier. But mixing these older stories with the latest rumor made the contents of the dossier seem even more salacious.

What is most remarkable about the story of the dossier is how much has been written about something about which we know practically nothing.

Here is what we actually know about this alleged document, as reported in *The Guardian*:

The newspaper said the cardinals described a number of factions, including one whose members were "united by sexual orientation".

In an apparent quotation from the report, *La Repubblica* said some Vatican officials had been subject to "external influence" from laymen with whom they had links of a "worldly nature". The paper said this was a clear reference to blackmail.

It quoted a source "very close to those who wrote [the cardinal's report]" as saying: "Everything revolves around the non-observance of the sixth and seventh commandments."

The seventh enjoins against theft. The sixth forbids adultery, but is linked in Catholic doctrine to the proscribing of homosexual acts.

La Repubblica said the cardinals' report identified a series of meeting places in and around Rome. They included a villa outside the Italian capital, a sauna in a Rome suburb, a beauty parlour in the centre, and a former university residence that was in use by a provincial Italian archbishop.

All of this is based not only on unsourced rumors, but rumors so wrapped in code language like "worldly nature" and "the non-observance of the sixth and seventh commandments" that they required exegesis be understood.

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There is no evidence that anyone has actually observed the red dossier. Yes, rumor has it that three cardinals produced it, and the pope read it and locked it in a safe. But to our knowledge, no one has actually seen a copy or can reproduce a single page of it.

The rumors suggest three realities that most of us accepted long ago: There is dysfunction inside the Vatican; some priests are gay; and some priests are especially egregious in their failures to honor their commitment to celibacy.

But this gossip also does something far more harmful: It demonizes gay priests. It paints a picture of gay priests as reckless, incapable of curbing their lustful urges, and prone to dressing in drag. Worst of all, these stories were used to support a claim that these "priests behaving badly" were Benedict's final straw. The dossier, we were told, forced Benedict not only to abandon hope, but the throne of Peter as well.

What I find intriguing is that out of this alleged 300-page document, the only rumors that been disclosed are those depicting a licentious gay cabal inside the Vatican and gay priests breaking their vows.

But what I truly find troubling is that as these allegations swirled, we also began to hear some very orthodox Catholics break ranks with the church's position on celibacy.

The first came from Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the most senior Catholic cleric in the United Kingdom. To the surprise of many, O'Brien called for the next pope to review mandatory celibacy, pointing out that the teaching had no "divine origin."

Of course, just days after O'Brien made these statements, revelations that he may have had inappropriate sexual contact with at least four men suggested that he himself might not be the best candidate for heterosexual marriage. The allegations against O'Brien were stunning given that his past anti-gay statements won him the dubious title of "bigot of the year" from a British gay rights group in November.

O'Brien, it seems, lends further credence to the theory that few homophobes are truly heterosexual. But even more disturbing, for me, was to hear he was also pushing for the possibility of lifting celibacy.

And he isn't the only conservative voice that seems to be rethinking this tradition.

Earlier this week, I appeared on a panel about the papacy for a webcast on Huffington Post Live. The panel included the Catholic League's Bill Donohue. While much of what Donohue spouts typically shocks me, what really took me aback this time was the ease with which he suggested that celibacy is a doctrine with which the church could probably dispense.

With the convergence of these degrading images of gay priests coming from the Vatican and the talk of changes to the celibacy doctrine coming from conservative, anti-gay Catholics, I have become a bit wary of the push to welcome married men into the priesthood.

As I have discussed previously in *NCR*, the Vatican has already begun welcoming married Anglican priests into the Roman Catholic ordination rite. However, these are the men who have left their church because of their disgust over its increasing inclusion of gays, lesbians and straight women in the priesthood.

Much as I would love to see the teaching on celibacy change, I'm also aware that just because the priesthood opens up to married men does not mean it opens up to progressive, justice-oriented, married men.

As we push for the lifting of mandatory celibacy, we must be aware that a change that could appear to be "progress" could have a dark side, especially for gay priests. It is true that in its current state, the priesthood can act as a refuge for gay men who want to avoid their sexualities. But simply opening up the priesthood to married men could also eventually make the priesthood a domain for married heterosexuals only.

Lifting celibacy runs the risk of creating a climate in which gay priests are driven from the church, similar to the way Benedict XVI attempted to drive gays from the seminaries back in 2005.

The truth is that there are many wonderful, popular gay priests who are working in our midst. But sadly, with the exception of courageous men like Fr. Fred Daley, who came out to his congregation in 2004, most of these priests feel they must work from the closet.

For these reasons, we must remember that if we are going to argue for changes in the rules surrounding ordination, we must argue for a true transformation of the priesthood. We must fight for a priesthood that bears all of the marks of justice, which means the inclusion of married men, women, openly gay men and lesbians, and anyone who holds the charism of celibacy.

A truly just priesthood is the only kind of priesthood that stands a chance of flourishing in this broken church that continues to send so many away empty.

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