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## **Sex, scandal and sadness in the Catholic church**

by Brian McNaught

Perspective

Whether or not Pope Benedict XVI resigned because of a gay-related scandal in the Vatican, there is no doubt that gay sexual scandals among the clergy today are causing the average Catholic, and the average gay man, a great deal of sadness.

The head of the Scottish Catholic church, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, resigned amid allegations he was physically inappropriate with four priests. Msgr. Kevin Wallin is in a Connecticut jail, accused of dealing crystal meth from the rectory, which he allegedly did to pay for his sex and drug addictions.

When I read about O'Brien, I had much less sympathy for him than I did for Wallin because the cardinal was publicly anti-gay. Such hypocrisy makes me angry and ill. But the story of Wallin made me very sad because, if true, he represents to me the disturbing syndrome of self-destruction I see among so many smart, talented, good-hearted gay men inside and outside of the Catholic church. And in Kevin Wallin's tragic fall from grace, I see myself had I made different choices in life than I did.

Had I pursued the path to the seminary, I suspect I would have been a very popular priest. I care deeply about the well-being of others. I'm funny, love people, am young at heart, am spiritual, independent, a good speaker and a minister at the core of my being. I'd also have been a closeted gay man whose guilt and fear about sex would have made me a prime candidate for acting out inappropriately -- not with children, but with other men. Because I have a compulsive personality, I'd become addicted to drugs if someone introduced me to them in the context of sex. I would have had sex and taken drugs in the attempt to leave no stone unturned in my search for self-understanding and affirmation. Without the intervention of wise, strong, loving friends, I would have ended up looking in the mirror wondering in horror and shame what had happened to the sweet young man who entered the seminary because he wanted to live a life of loving service.

There are many gay men today who look in the mirror and wonder how they became the sex-obsessed, drug-addicted people they see reflected back at them. They perhaps look over at a picture of themselves in their graduation gown, grinning with excitement about the life they might have as an attorney, doctor, architect, actor, singer, lover and father. But their careers and their plans for family life took a back seat to their obsession to look young and hot and to be sexually satisfied. They became addicted to searching the Internet for a nearby sex partner with whom they might fall in love. They took crystal meth because initially it enhanced their sex, but then sex without it felt flat.

Eventually, they got HIV. They thought only stupid people got HIV, but soon it became an important component of their gay male identity. Everyone they knew was HIV-positive. But so what? Half of the gay nonprofits in town are set up to meet the needs of a person with AIDS, so it's not such a big deal to have the disease. But when they hit bottom, like being arrested for selling drugs or losing their job, they are forced to look in the mirror and try to make sense of how the very sweet, innocent, young man got to the sorry place he is today.

The sex scandals among gay men my age, regardless of whether they're in the Vatican or in my circle of friends, make me angry because I feel useless to do anything helpful. They sadden me because I see the lost potential and the consequences of the senseless choices that were made. I feel scared, because I see what might have become of me had I chosen to live differently.

I chose to come out of the closet in my 20s because I couldn't breathe. I chose to quit drinking and smoking pot in my 40s to stop making a fool of myself and to enhance the quality of my relationship with Ray. Despite my feelings of lust for attractive, well-built men and my need for affirmation of my aging body, I choose not to pursue gratification in an air-brushed reality and instead be grateful for the intimacy I share with Ray in our everyday lives. I chose a life of awareness.

Most other gay men I know feel as I do. They're aware of their anxiety that their families, neighbors and co-workers will judge them by the reckless behavior of other gay men. It's not that they haven't thought about doing everything scandalous that they read about in the paper or hear about from friends, but they know they will have to sacrifice everything good in their lives if they head down that path of sexual obsession. There is sympathy and empathy in my house and in the homes of my gay friends for the gay men whose names appear in "shocking" news reports. No one feels superior to those men who got caught or who got AIDS. The most important feelings we have are those of gratitude for the circumstances that enabled wise decision-making and compassion because we know poor choices made by others often represent our shared weaknesses.

I'm no longer a Catholic, so I can't speak to the feelings of other Catholics about gay sex scandals in the church. My guess is that many people feel as disappointed as I do that the sweet, innocent church of our youth can no longer recognize itself in the mirror. That's not the fault of gay clergy. Much of it is due to

the addiction of Benedict XVI and other popes to control, secrecy and tradition. Like the lives of gay men who also made wrong choices, the Vatican is a mess. I'm grateful my spirituality is no longer impacted by the scandalous addictions of the church, and I'm compassionate knowing I have the same weaknesses that made the pope and the cardinal archbishop of Scotland behave the way they did.

[Brian McNaught was fired by the Detroit archdiocese in 1974 when he started the Detroit chapter of Dignity. He went on to become what the New York *Times* described as "the godfather of gay diversity training." He is the author of six books, including *A Disturbed Peace - The Sad Dilemma of the Gay Catholic*. More of his writing can be found at [brian-mcnaught.com](http://brian-mcnaught.com).]

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