[Book Review of] *After Asceticism: Sex, Prayer and Deviant Priests*, by The Linacre Institute

Daniel B. Gallagher
Book Review


As preliminary reports of the Congregation for Education’s long-awaited “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders” (“Instruction” hereafter) began to leak into the general public, the popular press relayed its alleged contents to the general public in characteristically garbled terms: “Vatican May Ordain ‘Transitory’ Gay Men” (New York Times, November 12, 2005); “Vatican: ‘Deeply rooted’ gays can’t be priests” (Chicago Sun Times, November 12, 2005); “Vatican: Gays Are Unwelcome as Priests” (Miami Herald, November 23, 2005). Such headlines, lacking all requisite precision and nuance, clouded the substance of the instruction, while simultaneously revealing the ubiquitous moral confusion necessitating its promulgation in the first place.

Rather than bringing a definitive closure to the issue of homosexuality and the priesthood, the document marked a new beginning. It marked the beginning of a time in which more careful deliberation on whom to admit to seminary and on whom to recommend for holy orders was absolutely essential for safeguarding the Church from another “long winter” of scandal. It marked the beginning of an era in which a deeper understanding of the causes, symptoms, and cures of homosexuality should be sought with vigor. Above all, it marked the beginning of a period in which a return to the Church’s tried-and-true practices of penance, prayer, and fasting was the only way to make progress on the path to holiness and take up the call to preach the Gospel to the world once more.

After Asceticism: Sex, Prayer and Deviant Priests, by the Linacre Institute, makes a valuable contribution to that new beginning. Drawing from a vast array of scientific and spiritual resources, the authors present a highly detailed argument which I have taken the liberty to summarize in four interconnected points: (1) The general phenomenon emerging from the clerical abuse crisis of 2002 was not one of pedophilia, but pederasty; (2) the phenomenon of pederasty is in essence a manifestation of a deeper problem of homosexuality in the priesthood; (3) the problem of homosexuality in the priesthood cannot be attributed to a repressive, stifling attitude towards human sexuality, but rather to a permissive, even encouraging, attitude toward pursuing the fulfillment of unbridled sexual
desire; (4) the only way to remedy the problem is to reject the false promises of a therapeutic mentality in favor of a return to virtuous self-control, which can only be acquired by self-denial, which can only be exercised through concrete practices of asceticism, the most effective of which is the regular discipline of fasting, and which, like all other ascetical practices, must be supported by a life of prayer, through which one cultivates a friendship with, and strives toward unity with, God Himself. Allow me to touch upon each of these summary points in turn.

**Analyze John Jay Report**

The authors offer an in-depth analysis of the much-touted John Jay Report, which had been commissioned by the United States’ Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) as a way of collecting data to ascertain the extent of the clerical abuse crisis. The data clearly reveal that the bulk of abuse cases involve near-pubescent, pubescent, and post-pubescent males. Initial assessments in the popular media mistakenly described the crisis as one of “pedophilia,” when in fact what we have been dealing with is a crisis of “pederasty.” Pedophilia is a clinical term denoting the sexual abuse of children, both male and female. Though it is not used in diagnostic manuals, the term ephebophilia appears in research literature as a way of describing abusive behavior toward adolescent males. However, the John Jay report indicates that many of the abuse cases involved sexual activity over a span of time during which the victim moved from pre-adolescence to adolescence, and/or from adolescence to adulthood. The data do not give strong evidence for exclusive predation towards any specific age-group, but do indicate a general disordered affection for young males. Thus, according to the Linacre authors, “the term pederasty is an accurate description of the behavior in over eighty percent of clerical abuse cases” (p. 9).

The authors further note that the phenomenon of pederasty is more understandable from a psychological point of view when we take into consideration the fact that many abusers, though perhaps entering the seminary with some susceptibility to sexual malformation, seemed to have acquired deviant sexual inclinations while in the seminary and/or within the first years after ordination. Indeed, a good number of those coming out of seminary with homosexual inclinations had entered with relatively few preliminary risk factors predisposing them toward such inclinations. In the late fifties and early sixties, most seminary applicants were coming from relatively stable, intact families. But as the cultural and sexual revolution began to explode, seminary halls were rapidly filling with the air of moral and doctrinal leniency for which the 1960s and 1970s are now so infamous. Even more significantly, this new air snuffed out the atmosphere of asceticism and austerity seminarians needed to develop strong habits of

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temperance and courage. In short, though "personality characteristics undoubtedly played some role, (the) social conditioning brought on through the breakdown in ascetical discipline must have played a significant part" (p. 21).

As reasonable as this thesis may sound, it is not so easy to prove directly by empirical means. In some cases, this is due to a shortage of quality scientific studies. The John Jay report, for example, provides us with useful information regarding rates of incidence within certain demographical and geographical groupings, but does not shed much light on the pathologies underlying the abusive behavior and their causes. Though it helped to shed light on the extent of the problem, it did little to expose its real nature. For this, the Linacre authors extrapolate from the given data and make correlations to societal trends and the general collapse of solid priestly training. Above all, they refreshingly take recourse to more trustworthy sources of psychology and philosophy than those represented in the work of Eugene Kennedy and Donald Cozzens.

The book goes a long way in helping to corroborate the claim that the abuse crisis is but a tragic symptom of a deeper problem of homosexuality in the priesthood. To their credit, the National Review Board, whose members were appointed by the USCCB, came to the same conclusion in their 2004 report. Yet the Linacre authors lament the fact that serious scientific studies on the extent of homosexuality within the priesthood are sorely lacking. Determining the relative ratio of heterosexuality and homosexuality among abusive priests, they point out, was not one of the aims of the John Jay report. Though I have a strong feeling that the Linacre authors are correct in their assumption that over the last forty years or so there has been a higher percentage of homosexual men among the clergy than there has been among the general male population, I cannot help but find some of their data unconvincing.

For example, using Bayes’ Theorem, the authors deduce that, if the actual percentage of homosexual priests is around 30 (a number based on the findings of Richard Sipe and other "informed observers"), then the “odds of abuse” ratio between homosexual and heterosexual clergy would be 9 to 1. The authors then proceed to compare this 9 to 1 estimate to a study conducted on incarcerated sex offenders in a Canadian jail system without due regard for the highly unique characteristics of such a sample population. The authors note that whereas the homosexual to heterosexual ratio among convicted felons in the Canadian jail was one to three, the ratio for United States clergy members guilty of abuse, at least according to the John Jay report, was three to one. The authors then use these figures to perform a calculation yielding an estimated percentage of homosexuality among the clergy at 27%. Among the numerous assumptions that must be made for the calculation to be reliable, however, the following is most
egregious: namely, that the homosexual/heterosexual level of inclination toward molestation within the jail population reflects the relative level among the general male population. This, it seems to me, is a highly questionable assumption.

Implementation of the Instruction

Nevertheless, given the paucity of data available for interpretation, the authors do their best with what they have. Without falling into rashness, we do live at a time when we cannot afford to shy away from acting prudently upon general impressions and intuitions. If my being a student in the seminary system between 1993 and 2000 places me among the “informed observers”, I would venture to estimate that the percentage of men in the seminary who were homosexual dropped considerably over that time span from somewhere around 20 percent to somewhere just below 10 percent. Now, as a seminary formator, I can only say that my colleagues and I are currently making every effort to ensure a full and honest implementation of the norms and directives contained in the Instruction issued by the Congregation for Education.

In regard to how that implementation affects our overall program of formation, I find the third summary point mentioned above to be of extreme importance. We have suffered for too long the ranting of pop psychologists and errant moral theologians who decry the unnaturally oppressive stance of Catholic moral doctrine towards sexual fulfillment and emotional well-being. The authors not only offer plenty of recent scientific evidence demonstrating the natural benefit of moderation in regard to sexual procreation and reproduction among all living organisms, they propose once again the commonsensical wisdom of Thomas Aquinas and classical science in general to argue for reason’s place in the proper ordering of the appetites. The desire for food and other essential resources for life is closely linked to the desire for sex. In short, asceticism is not only a spiritual practice, but is rooted in biology itself.

Most significantly, the authors argue for a serious retrieval of the value of “shame” in the attainment of virtue. To sex educators of the seventies and eighties, shame was the enemy to be defeated. Shame hinders our ability to express ourselves and to appreciate the true beauty of sex. We need to overcome our inhibitions and talk frankly about our drives and yearnings. Shame, however, is absolutely crucial for proper psychological growth leading to affective maturity. “Shame,” the authors write, “is the fear of behaving in a particular way because the behavior or inclination is at once seen as both desirable and disgraceful” (p. 78). Only if we maintain a proper sense of shame will we be able to form the acute moral conscience necessary to discern good from evil.

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I can hardly stress enough the importance of the authors’ discussion of shame, its relation to honesty, and its relevance for priestly formation. Though it has its proper place in priestly training, the practice of “theological reflection” (TR) had been gravely abused both in the literature and in practice. TR had become the sacrosanct forum in which absolute “transparency” was expected and the masking of “true feelings” was the only crime. Occasionally, students were encouraged to share their sexual orientations openly with the rest of the group, while the rest of the group was expected to accept each individual for who he (or she) was. In some extreme cases, a member might even confess to being sexually attracted to another member of the group within this “safe” and “confidential” environment.

The irony is that this belittling of shame was done for the sake of enhancing “honesty” (i.e., “transparency”) among the group. Yet, as the Linacre authors argue, shame and honesty, though orientated toward different types of behavior, essentially compliment one another. Whereas shame inhibits us from behaving badly, honesty empowers us to behave well. Honesty, when exercised in tandem with shame, leads the person not only to fear the performance of bad actions, but to delight in the performance of good actions. Honesty is distorted into “transparency” when it is taken to mean that one must share whatever he wants, with whomever he wants, whenever he wants, without any fear of his desires and actions being judged good or bad by anyone else. When TR was high-jacked by pop psychologists brainwashed with a therapeutic mentality, it became a place where one person could freely express his deep homosexual inclinations, yet another person could not bring up the disordered-ness of those same inclinations as a topic for reflection and discussion.

I admit that the fourth summary point mentioned above should probably have been broken up into several sub-points. Yet I kept them together for a reason. This book is quite distinctive in that it does not shirk from interlinking the higher human desires with the lower, the physical with the spiritual, the inner with the outer, and the scientific with the philosophical. We have been in dire need of a thoughtful interlinking of these realms for quite some time. My fourth point, therefore, could perhaps be abbreviated in the following way: the therapeutic mentality, as it is described by the authors, will stymie the journey towards God, whereas the virtuous mentality will facilitate it. In theological terms, we could say that the only way to the resurrection is by way of the cross. Be that as it may, one of the most attractive features of this book is that it does not rely too heavily on theological terminology. Not that theological terminology is inappropriate, but unfortunately theological terms (1) have been abused so often in the corresponding literature that they have sadly lost much of their impact, and (2) the capacity of many persons whose roles are essential to
integral priestly formation (i.e., psychologists, counselors, teachers in various other disciplines) to comprehend the theology is somewhat limited. Moreover, the bottom line is that of the four areas of priestly formation described in John Paul II's landmark exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the human dimension warrants our greatest attention at this point in the history of priestly formation. The Instruction, in fact, notes that "it is necessary to highlight the particular importance of human formation as the necessary foundation of all formation." It is too easy to spiritualize or theologize a discussion of the suitability of a specific candidate for the priesthood. Comments such as "but Jesus loves him just as much as He loves anybody else," "deep down, he really is a man of prayer," and "who are we to say that God didn't create him that way" are quite frankly superfluous when it comes to a serious discussion of seminarian "X", his struggle with strong homosexual tendencies, and his fitness for holy orders. I may agree wholeheartedly that he is loved by Jesus just as much as anybody else. I may have some reservations about the quality of his spiritual life, but I may still grant that he is a man of prayer. I certainly find it rather far-fetched to think that God directly implanted strong homosexual tendencies in him. Yet all of this sidesteps the real issue. The real issue for seminarian "X" is neither spiritual nor theological. It's human. His strong homosexual tendencies indicate that he does not possess the requisite affective maturity to be a spiritual father to the flock the Lord has entrusted to the pastoral care of the priestly order.

The Problem Well-Framed

So, as much as I esteem the monumental theology of the body that John Paul II of blessed memory has left behind as a legacy of his profound insights into human love and sexuality, I welcome with equal enthusiasm the Linacre Institute's laudable feat of framing the problem of deviant priests in terms of psychology, philosophy, and science. That is exactly what we need to bring us back down to earth so that we can lead others to heaven.

The authors argue that control over sensory stimulation and the use of the imagination are the only ways to keep the basic human desires for food and sex in check. Seminarians should be trained to constantly monitor their use of television, computers, video games, movies, music, and other forms of entertainment. Gone are the days when it was thought beneficial to have seminarians watch a pornographic film together in a controlled environment so that they might overcome sexual hang-ups and be sensitized to the ways in which the gift of sexuality can be easily misused. Though many will find it unpalatable, the authors make a strong argument that the disordered desires of homosexuality both stem from an unbridled
engagement in sensory pleasure, as well as inflame the craving for sensual
pleasure all the more. The spiritual masters taught that a life given to the
sensory pleasure enervates a man’s desire for spiritual things which are
only attainable through a life of asceticism, prayer, and divine grace. He
quickly finds such things distasteful, boring, and even repulsive. Without
wanting to be too glib, show me a priest who finds it almost unbearable to
sit for five minutes in front of a tabernacle, and I’ll show you a priest who
is fragmented, intemperate, floundering in chaste habits, and evasive of his
priestly duties. Show me a priest who begins his day with an hour before
the tabernacle, and I’ll show you a priest who is integrated, temperate,
persevering in chaste habits, and zealous for his priestly duties.

Again and again, this book emphasizes the indispensable value of
fasting and abstinence for the attainment of virtue and progress in the
spiritual life. At times, I found myself slightly suspicious that the authors’
basic argument was too simplistic: would a greater solicitude for
asceticism and fasting in seminary training really have prevented the
sexual abuse crisis? Though the book perhaps may overstate the case ever­
so-slightly at times, the authors have thoroughly convinced me that greater
solicitude in these matters certainly would have helped. More significantly,
I can attest from my personal experience that greater solicitude for
asceticism and fasting, combined with a firmer commitment to prayer and
the spiritual life, can transform one’s priesthood. This book has now helped
me to move from an understanding based on personal experience toward
an understanding based on psychology, philosophy, and science. Only
through a better understanding on both levels will I and my fellow
formators be able to carry out the daunting task of priestly formation more
confidently and effectively. If nothing else, fasting reminds us
continuously that ultimately this is the work of the Spirit and not our own.
But, as the book makes clear, such a realization should not lead us to take
our personal investment in this work of priestly formation any less
seriously. I can say with confidence that the returns on such an investment
will only increase after a careful study of After Asceticism by each and
every individual sharing in the responsibility of preparing priests for the
third millennium.

– Rev. Daniel B. Gallagher
Sacred Heart Major Seminary
Detroit, Michigan