

## From the Bishop

With the publication of the Vatican document last December on the issue of homosexuality and the ordination of priests, I received a number of inquiries and comments. Some comments were quite harsh; for instance, "A gross injustice!" Others felt that the document was a bigoted step backward. Convinced that a clarification was needed, I began to prepare this message.

In the process, I came across an article in the *National Catholic Register*, where Scott McDermott addresses most of the significant points of this issue from the perspective of an insider. So in place of my usual message this month, I present Scott McDermott's analysis of this important question. Bishop Victor Galeone

Why I thank God I couldn't be a priest  
The issue of homosexuality and the ordination of priests

The Vatican's new document on the ordination of homosexuals brings it all back.

I sat in the mental hospital for five days, reading Trollope, watching the Nagano Olympics, and giving God an earful.

Why me Lord? Why, when all I wanted was to serve God as his priest?

My desire for priesthood was born out of gratitude for my deliverance from the homosexual lifestyle and from my history of depression. Since my conversion to the Catholic faith in 1992, I had functioned for five years without anti-depressants, and I thought I had mastered my same-sex attractions sufficiently to manage as a priest.

My therapist knew I wasn't ready. I didn't listen, and unfortunately, the religious community that had accepted me to its novitiate didn't ask for extensive psychological documentation. Nor did the vocation director probe my struggles with homosexuality and depression in any detail.

There was one obstacle, however. I was expected at the novitiate in January 1998, but first I had to pay off all my debts, as this was an austere community and I would be leaving the world behind. My plan was to write my way out of debt by marketing my fiction.

As my published novels remained unpublished, I grew increasingly hard to live with, and as soon as the January deadline passed, I went into free fall. Like Icarus, the mythological boy who flew to the sun on wings of wax, I had overreached. Flying too high, I crashed into the psychiatric ward, where my dream of priesthood vanished.

In the debate over the recent Vatican instruction on homosexual candidates for priesthood, many writers have already discussed the need for priests to have a healthy masculinity, so that they can act as fathers to their flocks and as husbands to the bride of Christ, the church. Others have discussed the temptations to which homosexually inclined men may be exposed in the seminary. But the issue is broader than sexual identity.

Many scientific studies have shown that homosexuals have a much higher incidence of clinical depression, suicidal tendencies and drug and alcohol addiction than the general public. Scholarly articles proving this point are simply too numerous to list here. In fact, the scientific literature is completely unequivocal on this point.

In my own case, I had experienced significant healing in terms of my gender identity, but my other psychological symptoms were sufficient to disqualify me from priesthood. After my collapse, a vocation

director from another religious order put it to me kindly but firmly. The priesthood is a stressful job” he said.

To hammer this point home, he told me about a young man, a friend of the religious community, who had been killed in a motorcycle accident. At the crash scene, the vocation director had the gruesome task of “finding something to anoint.”

His point was clear. Faced with that type of priestly responsibility, I would have had a panic attack. A few scenes like that, and I would probably have ended up back on the ward, with ample time to read all 47 of Trollope’s novels.

Priests tend to see people at moments of crisis: not only death, but also in their struggles with their own personal demons of addiction, crime, mental illness and, yes, sexual brokenness (not to mention actual demons.) The priest must be strong and healthy or he will be drawn into this maelstrom himself.

This is not to say that people, like me, who struggle with emotional difficulties and same-sex attractions, cannot be great, committed Christians.

Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 2358) teaches that Catholics who experience unwanted same-sex attraction, like those afflicted with any other cross whatsoever, can offer up their sufferings for the good of the church and the salvation of others. But this does not mean, as the recent Vatican document makes clear, that people with “deep-seated” homosexual attractions are capable of exercising the ministerial priesthood.

In our culture, we have developed the absurd habit of seeing vocation in terms of rights. But “equality before the law” does not mean that everyone is equally capable of fulfilling every role in our society. The priesthood is not an entitlement, it is a calling; God gives some men, and not others, the requisite gifts to live out the priesthood.

Indeed, a moment’s thought should convince anyone that this is true of every vocation, not just priesthood. Someone who panics at the sound of gunfire must not be sent into combat. People who faint at the sight of blood should not become surgeons. Narcoleptics should not be night watchmen. And so forth.

This is not discrimination. It is simple realism. It is God’s deep knowledge of us, calling us to true self-knowledge, the prerequisite of wisdom.

The huge cry over the instruction on vocations is part and parcel of the “clericalization of the laity” since the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II sought to recognize the proper, transcendent value of the role of lay people. But instead of honoring the irreplaceable call of the laity to sanctify the world, some Catholics have distorted the council’s teaching, in order to justify giving lay people more and more clerical functions.

This process has now advanced to the point that some people think the lay vocation is meaningless, that lay people are somehow worthless unless they can be called to the priesthood.

This is not the way of God’s Kingdom, where the last shall be first, and each calling has the proper dignity assigned to it by God.

For myself, painful as my disappointment was, I soon realized that priesthood was not the only way I could strive to do “something beautiful for God.” I should have known that my real calling was to be a writer, and shortly after I accepted my lay vocation, God gave me the opportunity to publish a book.

He rescued me from a vocation to which I was ill-suited, and led me to a fulfilling apostolate in keeping with my natural aptitudes.

Since my collapse, which was really a conversion experience, I have often reflected on one of the lesser-known sayings of Jesus. “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build, and was not able to finish’ (Luke 14:28-30).”

I wish I had pondered those words before I began my misguided request for priesthood. And I wish that the instruction on vocations with respect to homosexuality had come out sooner. Thank God we have it now. It will be remembered as one of the most compassionate acts of merciful pontificate.

- Scott McDermott

*Reprinted with the permission by the National Catholic Register. Scott McDermott is the author of Charles Carroll of Carrollton: Faithful Revolutionary, Scepter Press.*