

## Consensual Sex in the Priesthood

Sex, or better stated, the lack of sex, plays a prominent role in the priestly caste of the Roman Catholic Church. Celibacy, according to the Church, is the cornerstone of its priesthood.

Ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood requires the candidate to take a formal vow of celibacy; that is, he agrees not to marry or engage in sexual intercourse or intimacy with another person during the course of his priestly life. The vow of celibacy seeks to ensure that the lives of priests will be solely dedicated to the service of the Church through its priesthood. Celibacy in the priesthood is considered to be the official teaching of the Church, and it must be accepted.

The Catholic Church's hoped-for outcome is a celibate priestly caste, but what is the reality, do you think? On January 5, 2003, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a news article entitled "Nuns as sexual victims get little notice." This article provides much-needed insight about the practice of celibacy in religious orders today and, by extension, in the priesthood. The results of this national survey showed that about 40%, approximately 34,000, of all nuns had suffered some form of sexual trauma, and that some of that sexual abuse came at the hands of priests and other nuns.

Among the key findings, the survey showed that one in five nuns had been sexually abused as a child, mostly by men, and in 9% of the cases, the abuse was attributed to priests, nuns, or other religious people. One in eight of the nuns surveyed said she was sexually exploited, and of that number, two of every five said the sexual exploitation included genital contact. Almost one out of 10 in the survey had experienced sexual harassment, and of that number, more than half came at the hands of priests and nuns.

Prior to the national survey, St. Louis University had conducted a pilot study in 1995, which was limited to three orders of Catholic nuns residing in the greater St. Louis area. The pilot study contained additional questions, which were not included in the national survey conducted a year later. These questions related to consensual sex. The pilot survey showed that nearly half of all nuns had been involved with some sort of consensual sex during their religious lives, often with other nuns or priests. The questions relating to

consensual sex by nuns were dropped from the national survey because the researchers said they preferred the emphasis be placed on the sexual harassment and exploitation of nuns, and not on the topic of consensual sex, an issue they found to be “distracting.”

Politically, it is hard to fault the judgment of the researchers for withdrawing the consensual sex questions from the national survey. As disgraceful and scandalous as the sexual harassment and exploitation of Catholic nuns might be, the national headlines about consensual sex of nuns would have overwhelmed the findings about the harassment and exploitation of these nuns.

The final results of the survey were published by the Religious Research Association in December 1998 and received no publicity, national or otherwise – so much for any public outrage expressed by Catholic bishops or other religious leaders about the sexual victimization of its nuns. Doesn't this silence seem similar to the official Church cover-up over the past decades that precipitated the ever-increasing rise in child abuse committed by Catholic priests? In legal depositions, many bishops still rationalize their sexual abuse cover-up by saying it was necessary to protect the faithful from scandal. At what cost? More abuse, ever more money for cover-ups, and the most scandalous behavior of all, denial for the sake self-preservation.

What would be the percentage of priests who have engaged in consensual sex? We know from our own everyday experiences that men are more sexually aggressive than women, that men engage in more sexual activity than women. In Susan Mitchell's *American Attitudes* (3rd edition), we read that in 1998, men committed more adultery than women, men had sex more frequently than women, men had more sex partners, and, during the period 1993-1998, men had sex more frequently than women. Is it not reasonable to assume that if priests had been surveyed, the number of those engaged in consensual sex would have been more than that for nuns, certainly more than 60%?

The fundamental issue for Catholics is not whether consensual sex in the priesthood is right or wrong, but whether celibacy is or is not, in fact, the cornerstone of the priesthood, as the Church claims it to be. When Church laws and regulations, over many decades, are consistently honored in the breach by its ordained priests and its professed religious, it is incumbent upon

Church leadership to inform itself and make sound judgments about the efficacy of these regulations. Simply continuing to preach and teach Catholics the imperative of celibacy – that it is the most important characteristic of the priesthood – while knowing full well that the reality is quite different, exposes Church leaders to the charge that they are little more than the whitewashed sepulchres referred to in Matthew 23.

For many decades, the Catholic leadership in the United States faithfully followed the failed policy of paying hush money to cover up the sexual abuse committed by its priests. How many decades will it now take for these same leaders to confront the Church's failed policy of mandating celibacy for its priests?

