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Silenced priest warns of gay crisis

By Julia Duin

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Starting today, 290 of the nation's Catholic bishops will meet at the Capitol Hyatt for their yearly business meeting and to tie up loose ends on the massive sexual-abuse crisis that has shaken the U.S. Catholic Church to its core in the past two years.

Although it's been less than a year since the church revealed that there were 10,667 cases of abuse committed by 4,392 priests in a 50-year period, the message at the meeting will be that the crisis is under control.

But it's far from over, says a local Catholic priest who says the true source of the crisis is a priesthood that is "honeycombed" with homosexual clerics, especially in the Diocese of Arlington.

However, attempts by the Rev. James Haley, 48, to persuade his bishop of the problem have backfired. After hearing from the priest about numerous instances of homosexual activity among diocesan clergy, Arlington Bishop Paul Loverde ordered the priest silenced Oct. 23, 2001. This "precept of silence" -- usually only employed during church trial proceedings -- is rarely used to silence a whistleblower.

Thus, in the past three years, Father Haley's case, which also involves accusations of sexual misconduct against him, has become a cause celebre among many Catholics in the Diocese of Arlington.

It's also attracted the attention of the Vatican, which summoned him to appear before an ecclesiastical court in March. Church officials held two more hearings on the matter this summer and last week scheduled a fourth hearing in conjunction with the bishops' meeting. Less than 24 hours later, after the priest, now living several states away, had bought nonrefundable plane tickets to Washington, the meeting was canceled suddenly.

Father Haley says his only crime is his insistence that homosexual priests, not solely pedophiles, are at the root of the sexual-abuse crisis. The Catholic priesthood is demoralized, he says, by groups of homosexual clerics who control who gets admitted to seminary, which men get nominated for bishop and which priests get the plum parishes.

Based on his 17 years in the priesthood, he estimates that 60 percent of the Diocese of Arlington's 127 diocesan priests are homosexuals, which is high compared with national estimates of 30 percent to 50 percent from other authorities on the priesthood.

As his prospects of returning to life as a parish priest dwindle, he has amassed reams of tapes, videos, photographs, e-mail messages and 1,200 pages of documents for a tell-all book on homosexuality and the priesthood.

"I am astounded the bishops will protect these guys, promote them, even make them bishops," he says. "This is a huge moral issue, and if the bishops aren't clear on this, the pope needs to rule on it.

"People will say there's nothing wrong with homosexual priests as long as they are celibate. Well, that is a totally naive statement and totally wrong."

Backlash

Father Haley, who is living on a \$1,700 a month stipend from the Arlington Diocese and relies on his motorcycle for transport, says his troubles began after several confrontations with his bishop over the priest's charges that homosexuals were indulged by the diocese.

Bishop Loverde, in turn, has leveled several charges at the priest, ranging from sexual misconduct to talking with the press. He has turned the case over to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, overseen by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

The cardinal asked Bishop Thomas G. Doran of Rockford, Ill., to preside at an ecclesiastical court, which has met in three closed sessions this year. Once the case is wrapped up, it will be forwarded to the Vatican for judgment.

Bishop Doran was "supportive," Father Haley says, but he told the priest, "We cannot discuss the homosexual issue because there are people above us who don't think it's a problem."

"He also explained to me: Even if I was to win this hearing, Loverde would appeal this to another [Vatican] congregation. If I lose, I cannot appeal it, but if I win, he can appeal. So three to four years might pass."

Although Bishop Doran's office did not respond to several requests for comment, the Rev. Arthur Espelage, executive coordinator of the Canon Law Society, an Alexandria-based group of 1,500 specialists in church law and court procedures, says Bishop Doran's intervention means that the Vatican is concerned.

"This is a lot more serious than Bishop Loverde being ticked off at Haley," he says.

But Stephen Brady of the watchdog group Roman Catholic Faithful says Father Haley "made Loverde look bad, so they will make him pay a price by dragging this case out as long as they want."

"The bishops defend pedophile priests by saying canon law forbids them from removing them without just cause," he says. "But if someone like Father Haley embarrasses a bishop, the church ignores canon law and throws him out."

War of words

When questioned by The Washington Times on Sept. 8, Bishop Loverde refused to discuss the case and Father Haley's accusations.

"The canonical process is undergoing," he said, "and I cannot comment on it."

However, he has resurrected some 1995 sexual-misconduct charges against Father Haley made when the Most Rev. John R. Keating was bishop of the diocese.

The sexual-misconduct charge, Father Haley says, was from a 1994 conversation with a female friend, who, while describing the effects of her breast cancer, placed the priest's hand on where the surgery had taken place.

Although the woman and her attorney both refused comment when contacted by The Washington Times, the priest says, "There was no sexual misconduct."

"I've never had sex in my entire life," he says.

Bishop Keating found Father Haley not guilty of impropriety and assigned him a post as assistant pastor at All Saints Catholic Church in Manassas, the largest church in the Washington area with 20,000 members.

He was planning to promote the priest into a church pastorage in Sterling, when he died suddenly in Rome in 1998, says the Rev. James R. Gould, former vocations director for the diocese.

Father Haley is "a good man and a good priest," Father Gould said. "I am very concerned for him. It is still my hope to have him back in the priesthood, and he is always welcome with me."

Father Haley never got his promotion. According to a 233-page deposition filed July 24, 2002, in Arlington County Circuit Court, the priest became aware of an affair between a married parishioner, Nancy Lambert, and the Rev. James Verrecchia, then pastor of All Saints and Father Haley's boss. Mrs. Lambert became pregnant with Father Verrecchia's child, divorced her husband, then married the priest in the spring of 2000. Mr. Verrecchia is now parish administrator at Holy Innocents Episcopal Church in Atlanta.

Jim Lambert, the divorced husband of Nancy Lambert, then filed a \$5 million suit against the diocese on the grounds that Bishop Loverde knew of the affair months before the priest was ordered to stop seeing Mrs. Lambert.

The person who informed the bishop about the affair in June 1999 was Father Haley.

In the 2002 deposition, which Roman Catholic Faithful has posted at www.rcf.org, Father Haley also revealed sexually graphic details about other priests in the diocese.

"The bishop said there is nothing wrong with these guys," he recalled. "I said, 'You haven't lived with them.' "

The Arlington Diocese is one of a few in the country that refuses -- at least on paper -- to sponsor homosexual applicants for seminary. Most dioceses admit such applicants with a variety of sexual histories, although the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) will reconsider this policy at its June meeting in Chicago.

Father Haley contends that Bishop Loverde is loath to enforce diocesan policy, which was installed by his predecessor, Bishop Keating.

"I was never asked by my bishop if I was gay," Father Haley said. Bishop Loverde "told me he had no right to ask that question, but I said you have a right to ask that question if you are putting men together [in parish rectories] who are sexually attracted to each other."

Root of the problem

The Rev. Donald Cozzens, author of the 2000 book "The Changing Face of the Priesthood," estimates 50 percent of all Catholic priests are homosexual.

Psychotherapist Richard Sipe, a former Catholic priest who has written and spoken widely on the priesthood, says 15 percent of homosexual priests are sexually active.

If all homosexual clergy were to leave the U.S. Catholic Church now, the church would lose one-third of its bishops as well, added Mr. Sipe, whose new book on priestly sexual abuse dating back to the fourth century, comes out Nov. 15.

Father Haley says homosexuality is at the root of the huge priestly sex-abuse crisis in which 81 percent of the cases involved victims who were males younger than 18, according to a USCCB investigation.

"Isn't the huge amounts of AIDS among the clergy a symptom of the problem?" he asked, citing a 2000 Kansas City Star estimate of the rate of AIDS deaths among priests that is at least four times that of the general population. "These are guys who are supposed to be celibate, virtually chaste and modest.

"But I've seen priests put on cologne, dress up and go on dates with guys."

He wonders whether Pope John Paul II understands this.

"I would ask him, 'Your Holiness, is it proper to hire these men or not?' " Father Haley said. "You have to question whether or not these guys even have the rudiments of the faith."

The Catholic Church teaches that homosexuality is an "intrinsically disordered" condition and, on Oct. 25, released a document saying such behavior "is not consistent with moral law." But it has no formal prohibition against homosexual priests. A Feb. 2, 1961, Vatican directive does say that "advancement to religious vows and ordination should be barred to those who are afflicted with evil tendencies to homosexuality or pederasty."

In March 2002, as the clergy sex-abuse scandal in Boston assumed national proportions, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls told the New York Times that, "People with these inclinations just cannot be ordained."

He added, "That does not imply a final judgment on people with homosexuality ... but you just cannot be in this field."

That same year, Pope John Paul II told Brazilian bishops to be extremely careful when screening men for the priesthood so as to avoid "deviations in their affections."

"It is an ongoing struggle to make sure the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men," Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the USCCB, told the Associated Press.

Father Haley says the problem goes straight to the top.

"Loverde had said to me there's nothing wrong [with homosexuality] as long as you're celibate," he said. "So I said there would be nothing wrong with me living with nuns the rest of my life as long as I am celibate. He just looked at me."

Support from home

Northern Virginia Catholics have demonstrated outside Bishop Loverde's chancery, sent Father Haley 600 letters of support, contributed money to help defer his legal costs and set up a supportive Web site: www.truthinarlington.com.

"I know Father Haley to be a dedicated, holy priest," said a former member of St. Mark Catholic Church in Vienna, Va., where the priest served from 1987 to 1991.

"He impressed me with his reverence during Mass and excellent homilies, which have been always true to the Gospel. He was well-liked and well-respected in our parish," she said in an interview on the condition of anonymity.

She attributed his current troubles to "his zeal for the church," adding, "He wants it pure and holy."

Michael Gray, a parishioner at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Fredericksburg, Father Haley's last parish, said he was "a very good priest."

"He's a brilliant speaker. He's the best. There wasn't anything wrong with him. He just told the truth. He just stood up, and look where it's gotten him. He's been sent to limbo."

Charles Molineaux, a Catholic lawyer from McLean, buttonholed Bishop Loverde about Father Haley when he spotted the prelate at a funeral this spring.

"Loverde told me I needed to have patience," he said. "I said, 'Well, you know, bishop, justice delayed is justice denied.'"

"At that point, he blew his stack. He said I was being judgmental. I said, 'Well, I am a lawyer, and we make judgment calls, and you are being unjust.' "

Many local Catholics were shocked to read about two priests exposed in the deposition Father Haley gave in the Lambert divorce lawsuit, which the diocese unsuccessfully tried to seal.

The Rev. William J. Erbacher of St. Lawrence Catholic Church in Franconia resigned soon after the deposition revealed that he embezzled church funds and collected homosexual pornography featuring young boys. The diocese has never revealed the results of two audits of Father Erbacher, one conducted by the diocese and the other by the Internal Revenue Service.

St. Stephen the Martyr Church in Middleburg, Va., takes phone messages and mail for him.

The Rev. Daniel Hamilton, pastor of St. Mary's Church, resigned after the deposition claimed he kept a collection of sadomasochistic and homosexual pornography in his rectory bedroom. After a psychiatric evaluation for what the bishop termed his "improper activity," he went to live at St. Francis de Sales Church in Kilmarnock, Va.

The diocese lists both men as on leaves of absence. Father Haley said he provided Bishop Loverde incriminating material about six other priests in the diocese, plus additional names culled from e-mails in Father Erbacher's files.

"There were homosexual jokes being sent not only to men around the diocese, but to priests around the country," he said.

Which is why, Father Haley said, he was summoned to the diocesan chancery on that October afternoon in 2001, given four hours to vacate his rectory and ordered by the bishop to remain silent.

The bishop's only public response to Father Haley's charges came a year later -- in Sept. 14, 2002, and Dec. 3, 2002, letters defending his actions after the story hit the newspapers and TV.

"I want every parishioner in this diocese to know that allegations by some in the media stating that I have ignored priestly misconduct are absolutely false," he wrote.

"While Father Haley was always free to 'go over my head' and bring his accusations and criticisms to other ecclesiastical authorities, he chose instead to resort to the media."

Several of Father Haley's advocates suggest that Bishop Loverde got advice on priestly silencing from Altoona-Johnstown, Pa., Bishop Joseph Adamec. Bishop Adamec's diocesan newspaper,

the Catholic Register, ran a front-page photo of the two bishops on May 5, 2003, and informed readers that Bishop Loverde had been invited to speak in the diocese.

On Sept. 9, 1999, Bishop Adamec forbade a local priest, the Rev. Philip Saylor, from talking about the diocese's track record on sexual-abuse cases. Father Saylor was given a canonical "precept of silence," the same as was given to Father Haley, and threatened with excommunication if he disobeyed.

The bishop posted the order on his Web site, www.diocesealtjtn.org/news, and wrote a March 17, 2003, letter to the Wall Street Journal defending his decision. The bishop was under some pressure, because the Tribune-Democrat in Johnstown had published in June 2002 an investigation saying the diocese had allowed at least 10 pedophile priests to continue working while abusing hundreds of boys.

"There's a point where you have to put your faith on the line," Father Haley said. "You have to put your life at risk. I am willing to die for this. I am willing to stand up for the truth. Someday, this will all come out. The abuse scandal will seem small compared to this."

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