

Seminary Reform Needed in Wake of Sex Abuse Study

Dr. Rick Fitzgibbons Suggests Programs for Priests, Religious, Seminarians

WEST CONSHOHOCKEN, Pennsylvania, MAY 1, 2004 (Zenit.org).- The clerical sex abuse crisis shows the need for human and spiritual formation programs for priests and seminarians on the tragedy and specifically on the topic of sexuality, says a psychiatric expert.

Dr. Rick Fitzgibbons, a principal contributor to the Catholic Medical Association's statement on "Homosexuality and Hope," expressed that view in the wake of the findings of the recent study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Fitzgibbons shared his views with ZENIT.

Q: The John Jay report states that 80% to 90% of priests who sexually abused children over the past 52 years had been involved with adolescent boys -- ephebophilia -- not prepubescent boys -- pedophilia. What conclusions can be made about these findings?

Fitzgibbons: The John Jay report has revealed clearly that the crisis in the Church is not one of pedophilia, but of homosexuality. The primary victims have not been children, but adolescent males.

The treatment of the emotional conflicts that lead adult men to engage in homosexual behaviors with adolescent males can be effective provided there is a spiritual component to the healing process, as in the treatment of substance abuse disorders.

The loneliness and lack of male confidence from the adolescent stage of life that lead to same-sex attractions to teen-age males can be resolved with no further homosexual acting-out behaviors in highly motivated persons.

Therefore, my professional opinion -- and also that of many other mental health professionals -- is that consideration should be given to a re-evaluation of the Dallas Charter's policy of "one strike and you're out."

Q: Has the Church in the United States adequately faced the root causes of the sexual-abuse problem?

Fitzgibbons: Prior to the release of the John Jay report the basic root cause of the problem had not been clearly identified.

We can be thankful that this misunderstanding has been corrected. Hopefully, this clarification in regard to homosexuality as the basic problem that caused the crisis will result in a number of new steps being taken to protect the Church, the priesthood and teen-agers and children.

Q: What programs for priests, religious and seminarians need to be developed in response to the findings of the John Jay study?

Fitzgibbons: The most pressing need is not for programs for elementary school children but for

human and spiritual formation programs for priests and seminarians on the topic of the crisis in Church, priesthood and sexuality.

Such conferences could present the causes of same-sex attractions, particularly loneliness and a lack of male confidence, and ways in which these attractions can be resolved with the Lord's help.

Chastity should be presented as a healthy way of life. Farther John Harvey's book "The Truth About Homosexuality" could be an excellent resource, as well as the Catholic Medical Association's statement "Homosexuality and Hope." Also, issues related to heterosexual acting-out should be discussed.

Also, priests would benefit from ongoing pastoral formation programs on the Church's complete teaching on sexual morality in order to present this truth to parishes, high schools and Catholic universities. The priest who preaches this truth is more likely to live it.

Also, because the John Jay study reports a growing incidence of homosexual behavior in priests over the past three decades, those priests with same-sex attractions have a serious responsibility to protect the Church, her children and the priesthood from further shame and sorrow by addressing their emotional pain. The same applies to priests who are tempted strongly to act-out heterosexually.

Seminarians would benefit from formation programs on growth in affective maturity that address the emotional conflicts that lead to homosexual and heterosexual temptations. Seminarians should learn the truth about homosexuality, specifically that there is not a genetic cause and that it is preventable and treatable.

Seminarians with same-sex attractions should work to face and resolve their emotional conflicts in psychotherapy and with a spiritual director. They should not be ordained until these conflicts have been healed and they no longer identify themselves as being homosexual.

Q: In view of the John Jay report, what recommendations would you make for priests who have engaged in homosexual or heterosexual behaviors with adults?

Fitzgibbons: Married men who have not been faithful sexually to their spouses -- often the result of a number of factors including human weaknesses, marital conflict, excessive career stress, loneliness and lack of confidence -- rarely are asked to leave their wives and homes.

So, too, priests who have sinned sexually with adults should not be deprived necessarily of their priestly ministry. Rather emotional healing and spiritual direction should be sought which can result in lasting fidelity to the gift given by God.

Q: What is the importance of screening candidates for the seminary?

Fitzgibbons: Proper evaluation of candidates for the priesthood can protect the Church and her children. Much suffering could have been prevented had the proper screening of candidates for

seminary and religious life been done in the past.

The appropriate psychological evaluation of candidates for priesthood will definitely uncover most current and potential problems that would place a person at risk of sexual acting-out.

Protocols should be developed that will allow those professionals who screen candidates for the priesthood to identify those individuals with serious problems, to recommend therapy for those with correctable problems and to accept those who can live chaste celibacy and pose no threat to others.

Simply asking a candidate if he is a heterosexual or a homosexual, or if he is sexually interested in adolescents or children, is not sufficient.

Two different recent studies have found that the answers to a small number of questions about childhood and adolescent experiences, which relate to the development of a positive masculine identity, included within a larger questionnaire, allowed the clinical interviewer to conclude, with 90% accuracy, whether the subject has homosexual attractions.

When the evaluation reveals probable same-sex attractions, the candidate is not automatically excluded from consideration. If he is willing to do the hard work required to come to overcome his emotional pain of male insecurity, sadness and anger, his same-sex attractions could be resolved.

After he no longer identifies himself as a homosexual, he could reapply. The Church should not take the moral risk of allowing someone who identifies himself as a homosexual to enter the seminary.

Also, it is essential that mental health professionals involved in any way with the evaluation of candidates for seminary or with treating seminarians or priests, as well as the faculty at the seminaries, support the teaching of the Church on sexuality, particularly on homosexuality.

In our experience, there are some dioceses and religious communities that rely upon the work of mental health professionals who actively disagree with the Church's sexual morality. Given the specialized nature of evaluating candidates for seminaries we recommend that the psychologists and psychiatrists who engage in this important work be required to participate in ongoing educational programs given by those loyal to the Church's teaching on sexual morality.

Q: So, those with same-sex attractions are required to undergo some kind of therapy or counseling, and only on its successful completion are they to be allowed to enter?

Fitzgibbons: Yes.

Q: What kind of guarantees can be given in these cases -- a period of time living chastely, overcoming the attraction itself?

Fitzgibbons: Five years of chaste living is the recommendation of Father John Harvey.

Q: What kinds of programs need to be developed to help teen-agers as a result of the sex abuse crisis?

Fitzgibbons: Since the primary victims of the crisis were adolescent males, not children, the Church should consider developing a specific program for males in grades seven through 12.

The first principle in such a program should be to first do no harm; that is, it should protect the emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being of teen-agers. This conference should also present the Church's teaching on human love and sexuality. Unfortunately, most programs in use today fail to meet such standards.

The development of an educational program for adolescents should involve their parents as primary educators of their children. Important pertinent materials for adolescents and their parents in this regard are the Vatican's statement "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality," and articles on Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, for adolescents.

Also, there should be no fear of presenting the problem underlying the crisis -- that is, homosexuality. The new pamphlet of the Catholic Medical Association, "Homosexuality and Hope," which presents the truth on the possibility of healing, would be of great value.

Q: Do you think programs need to be developed for young children in response to the findings of the John Jay report?

Fitzgibbons: I am very concerned about this issue. Since 80% of the victims of clergy abuse were adolescent males, it is not clear that programs are necessary at this time for young children.

Also, a serious worry of many parents and Catholic mental health professionals is that programs presently in use or proposed for children on this issue fail to protect the innocence and emotional health of children, as well as ignore and disagree with the Church's teaching on human love and sexuality.

Other serious weaknesses in these programs are that they impose premature sex information on children that can damage them psychologically and rob them of their innocence; they teach in a public setting intimate matters that belong to the family; they usurp parents' involvement and supervision of the program; and they fail to address the root cause of the crisis -- homosexuality.

My professional opinion is that only after programs for priests, seminarians and adolescents are fully developed and have been operating for some time should programs for children be considered because of the many risks to children associated with sex abuse education.

In the meantime, the distribution in all dioceses of the Vatican's "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality" to Catholic parents would be helpful.

In the meantime, the distribution and formation of study groups for Catholic parents in all dioceses on the Vatican's document "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality" would be

helpful.

Q: In view of the John Jay report what do you think the Catholic laity can do?

Fitzgibbons: The laity should ask priests to preach chastity and the fullness of the Church's truth on sexual morality. Also, we can model and communicate to our children the beauty of God's plan for human love and sexuality.

We can be thankful for the vast majority of priests who are faithful and loyal to the Church. We should pray for the purification of the Church, the episcopate, the priesthood and marriages. We can support, encourage and pray for our priests and can trust in the Lord's promise in Jeremiah 3:15: "I will give you shepherds after my own heart."

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