**A Dangerous Possibility that Scarcely Dares to State its Name.**

I have always found it difficult to envisage how a pastorally minded bishop could bring himself to close a church or a parish for the alleged absence of any priest to appoint to it. Church and parish closures have proceeded steadily over the last few decades, yet no bishop seems willing to curtail the damage by asking permission, from the Pope, to ordain married men.

Over the years I have reflected upon every possible motive that might persuade a bishop to retain the current discipline, in spite of having to close churches. None of them is really convincing, except for one, which is so bizarre that for years I discounted it. Eventually though I could think of no other, and it is borne out by the pattern of recruitment, namely to protect the sensitivities of gay priests.

The desperate shortage of seminarians is allowed to get worse, but one significant clue has emerged. At present, and for the last couple of decades, those who are in close touch with the seminaries, state that the majority of seminarians are gay.

Having made that blunt statement, let me be frank about my own attitude to homosexuality. I am convinced that it is determined by the genes, and it has no inherently moral orientation, any more than heterosexuality, which is also determined by the genes. Some cultures have been hostile to it. For example in primitive societies, before the advent of scientific medicine, when infant mortality was rife, all adults were expected to produce children, and as many as possible, in case the tribe or clan might die out. In my experience, some of the most effective pastoral priests that I have known were gay, possibly because they had more sensitive personalities. Among my friends I am pleased to number several gay men, including two devoted couples in long term emotionally enriching partnerships.

Having stated that some primitive societies were hostile to gay men, it is also clear that some very sophisticated societies, even in the 20th century, were similarly hostile. As a result, a significant number of gay men resented their emotional orientation, and sought ways to disguise it. Some entered marriages in which they felt out of place. Others found a more comfortable concealment in the ranks of the Catholic clergy, precisely because celibacy is universally known to be an obligatory condition for ordination. That particular niche appeared to provide the perfect solution to their desire for concealment.

The previous sentence reminds me of a remarkable conversation that I had about 40 years ago with a bishop who is now dead, but I will not name him. I said to him “If the celibate life really does have so much spiritual value, would it not be reasonable to offer it to priests as a free choice?”. To this he replied “Unless it were compulsory, those of us who chose it, would be regarded as queers”. [*his word, not mine*].

Michael M Winter

Co-founder, and sometime chairman of MMaC