

# Poor screening blamed for priestly abuse crisis: Celibacy and homosexuality not causes

News in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Inadequate screening of potential priests, not celibacy or homosexuality, is to blame for the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, according to a blue-ribbon panel formed by the nation's Catholic bishops. The findings of the 12-member National Review Board were released late last month along with the first-ever report on the scope of sexual abuse of minors in the church.

"Dioceses and [religious] orders simply did not screen candidates for the priesthood properly," said Bob Bennett, the Washington attorney and board member who spearheaded the report. "As a result, many dysfunctional and psychosexually immature men were admitted into seminaries and ordained in the priesthood."

Bennett said celibacy has become an "albatross" for some priests and needs further discussion—something church leaders have resisted.

The board's 145-page report probed the "causes and contexts" of the scandal, which involved 4,392 accused priests, 10,667 victims and a cost of at least \$657 million that was tallied in a companion report by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

The report found that 80 percent of the abuse was "homosexual in nature," but the board said an inability to remain chaste—not homosexuality—was a more direct cause of sexual abuse among clergy. "There is no doubt there are many outstanding priests of homosexual orientation who live chaste and celibate lives," Bennett said. "Whether they are capable of living the celibate life is the paramount consideration. Sexual orientation should not be a requirement, one way or the other. Priests can be homosexual, but they must be celibate."

Louis Schlesinger, a professor at John Jay College and board expert in sexually motivated antisocial acts, was less quick to link homosexuality to the abuse of

children. “If heterosexual male priests are struggling with their natural sexual desires, they don’t say ‘I can’t have a woman, I’ll get a child.’ They aren’t going to switch their sexual preferences,” he said. “Also, it’s 1,000 times easier to get an adult man to have sex with you. It’s a grooming process to get a child to have sex. The issue is not if they’re gay, the issue is pedophilia and ephebophilia [attraction to adolescent sex partners].”

But Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee, who heads the bishops’ committee on priestly life and ministry, said more “up-front screening” is needed because gay seminarians and priests face “added temptations” in trying to live a chaste and celibate life. “There are pressing questions, and perhaps more urgent scrutiny, that needs to be given to a candidate who has homosexual inclinations,” said Dolan, a former rector of the flagship American seminary in Rome.

Dolan cautioned, however, that it is “completely absurd” to automatically link gay priests with pedophilia. The majority of gay priests, he said, are “faithful, celibate, chaste men.”

The board said the sex abuse crisis was worsened by bishops who covered up abuse allegations and whose fear of scandal was greater than their concern for victims. “Many breached their responsibilities as shepherds of the flock, and put their heads in the sand,” Bennett said. “They did not understand the broad epidemic nature of the problem. Some placed the interests of the accused priests above those of the victims.”

Bennett said fear of litigation also contributed to the crisis, with many bishops cloaking allegations in secrecy rather than report a priest to law enforcement. – *Religion News Service*