

Will new rules on gays mean any change at Catholic seminaries?

Screening out gays a long-standing routine: Screening out gays a long-standing routine

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When Joe Yokum considered a call to the Catholic priesthood five years ago, the first thing a seminary official asked him was not his understanding of the Trinity or of salvation, or even why he wanted to be a priest.

“Do you consider yourself to be a homosexual man?” Yokum recalled being asked. Jarred by the question, Yokum—now 27 and a third-year seminarian at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland—answered no.

“He wanted to know right away,” Yokum said of the questioner.

If Yokum had answered yes, he probably would have been denied admission—even before the November 29 release of new Vatican rules that are designed to keep men with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” from becoming priests.

As Catholics sift through the new rules, Yokum’s experience demonstrates an often overlooked fact: many seminaries, including Mount St. Mary’s, have made it routine practice to screen out gay men. It’s a policy that’s been on the books—although sometimes ignored—for nearly 45 years.

Different issues—including personal honesty, rules of confidentiality and individual bishops’ discretion—render the screening system less than “foolproof,” seminary officials concede, and may hinder enforcement of the new rules.

If the established practice at the nation’s second-largest Catholic seminary is typical—and officials say it is—the new rules will change little at the 193 schools that

train America's priests.

At Mount St. Mary's, Monsignor Steven Rohlf said it is standard procedure to "filter out" gay men. He said most or all of the 156 men "in the house" are heterosexual. "Do I believe it's so? Probably not, but that's the presumption," he said.

Critics have claimed that the document's ban on men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" is too ambiguous for officials to effectively screen the sexual orientations of priestly candidates.

Although the document draws from church teaching that regards gays as "objectively disordered," Vatican officials stepped forward to buttress the new guidelines, which have come under heavy fire inside and outside of the Catholic Church. They forcefully asserted that the ban was clear, since the church regards homosexuality as a condition akin to a medical disorder rather than a fixed sexual identity or orientation.

A cover letter to dioceses released later—not made public with the new guidelines—also said that gay priests already serving the church are not to lead or teach at Catholic seminaries even though their ordination remains valid.

The cover letter appears to communicate that the Vatican expects concrete steps to be taken. Since the letter is separate from the instruction on priestly candidates, however, its importance is open to interpretation. Estimates of the current percentage of gay priests vary widely, from 10 percent to four or five times that number.

It remains unclear whether the Vatican's understanding of homosexuality will resonate among local bishops.

Spokane bishop William S. Skylstad, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, greeted the norms as a "timely document," but appeared to embrace the concept of homosexual orientation. "We live in an era when the issue of sexual orientation is much discussed," he said, affirming "the dignity of all human beings and the respect that should be shown all people irrespective of sexual orientation." The bishop also said that "witch hunts and gay bashing have no place in the church."

Some observers warn that strict enforcement of the Vatican rules will lead to a lack of transparency in seminaries, rewarding candidates who attempt to suppress their homosexuality and punishing those who are open.

“The seminarians who are most transparent, most open with superiors, will be thrown out,” said Thomas Reese, a Jesuit American priest and Vatican analyst. “Those who are most in the closet, those who are most deceitful, those who are most dangerous, will in fact not tell you.”

Will the new instructions be the last straw for Catholic priests tired of shielding their identities from a church that condemns homosexuality?

One who left in 1998 and is now an Episcopal priest in the Newark (New Jersey) diocese said he believes the Vatican edict will force many priests out. Mariano Gargiulo, who said he remains friends with dozens of gay Catholic priests from his days in the Archdiocese of Newark, predicted that the ruling will heighten tensions within the church even though it doesn't apply to current priests.

“The Vatican . . . says that homosexuality is intrinsically disordered, and how many times can you be told that before you start to say, ‘Hey, maybe I should go somewhere else,’” Gargiulo said.

Older priests are less likely to leave, Gargiulo said, because they will need the Catholic Church to support their retirement. “They're going to hide,” he said. “They're going to put themselves deeper in the closet because it's a comfortable lifestyle.” *-Religion News Service*