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Evidence from Two Surveys of Catholic Priests in the
United States**

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Is Homosexuality in the Priesthood Diminishing? Evidence from Two Surveys of Catholic Priests in the United States

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Abstract

It is well documented that homosexuality in the Catholic priesthood outpaces homosexuality in the general population, a phenomenon that has captured the attention of many. In this study, we examined whether homosexuality is diminishing in the American Catholic priesthood. Data are from a 2002 survey of Catholic priests in the U.S. conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* (N=1,854) and the 2020-21 Survey of American Catholic Priests (N=1,036), which mostly replicated the former. The findings indicate that Catholic priests' perceptions of a homosexual subculture in their diocese or religious institute, as well as during their own seminary experience, have declined. The distribution of sexual orientations among Catholic priests remains unchanged since 2002. However, analyses based on decade of ordination reveal that homosexuality is becoming rarer as ordinations approach the present, most strikingly after the year 2000. A cohort-based projection model demonstrates that homosexual orientation in the priest population can be expected to be cut in half over the next 20 years. Since 2002, priests' experiences with celibacy have become less of a struggle, on average. The full implications of these dynamics remain to be seen, but they appear to reflect the Catholic Church's increased success in implementing its own stated institutional goals and policies.

Homosexuality among the Catholic clergy in the U.S. and elsewhere has been a perennial subject of interest, including among some social scientists and journalists (Hoge & Wenger, 2003; Kappler et al., 2013; Martel, 2019; Wolf, 1989). There are multiple reasons for such continued interest. Many are intrigued by the idea of the Catholic priesthood as itself a “closet,” which—perhaps owing to its requirement of celibacy—has historically attracted a disproportionate number of homosexual men (Martel, 2019; Sipe, 1990/2003; Tricou, 2018).¹ Additionally, while not common knowledge, the Catholic Church’s official stance is that homosexual men, even if not sexually active, should not be admitted to the priesthood (see Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005; Sullins, 2020a), which raises the question of whether the Church has been successfully upholding its own clear standards. With such topics in mind, the present study asks and answers a straightforward empirical question: Is homosexuality diminishing in the American Catholic priesthood?

Data with which to answer such a question have been hard to come by, as few seem inclined to ask the questions, and so most earlier estimates of homosexuality among Catholic clergy have been the product of hunches and guesswork (see Hoge, 2002). In this study, we draw from two surveys of Catholic priests in the U.S.—one from 2002 and another from 2020-21—to examine this topic. The latter survey is primarily a replication of the earlier one, allowing us to compare responses to identical measures two decades apart.

The findings provide reliable numbers about this “secret world” (Sipe, 1990/2003). Compared to 2002, Catholic priests are less likely to perceive a homosexual subculture in their present diocese or religious institute. Likewise, a question about the presence of a homosexual subculture in one’s seminary at the time respondents were attending shows a steady decline according to ordination cohorts (and thus the time of seminary experiences) since the 1980s. The distribution of sexual orientations among priests in the U.S. is unchanged since 2002 in the aggregate, but further analyses based on decades of ordination reveal that homosexuality is becoming rarer as ordinations approach the present, most strikingly after the year 2000. Using a simple cohort-based projection model out to 2051, we show that as newer cohorts of priests compound and as older priests exit the population, homosexual orientation can be expected to decline substantially among the priest population in the aggregate as well. Lastly, we demonstrate that priestly celibacy appears to be less of a struggle today than it was 20 years ago, on average. Nevertheless, homosexual priests are markedly more likely than heterosexual priests, both now and in 2002, to report a diminished personal commitment to celibacy.

Homosexuality in the Catholic Priesthood

It is well documented and widely known that homosexuality in the Catholic priesthood outpaces the same in the general population. Estimates of the percentage of homosexual priests in the U.S. have varied considerably over recent decades, but they typically range from 25 to 50 percent (Cozzens, 2000; Hoge, 2002; Sipe, 1990/2003; Wolf, 1989). Although not cited, this body of work is likely what *Los Angeles Times* journalist Jill Richardson had in mind when she introduced new survey findings in 2002, reporting figures from the newspaper’s nationwide survey of Catholic priests (Richardson, 2002).

More recent research employing the *L.A. Times* data indicates that the percentage of homosexual Catholic priests is much lower than 25 to 50 percent.² Sullins’ (2020b) analysis showed that in 1950, only 2 percent of priests were homosexual, consonant with the general population at the time. Beginning in the 1950s, however, homosexual men entered the Catholic

priesthood at rates that far exceeded what might have been expected in the population, hence concentrating their numbers. Sullins (2020b, p. 82) provides a glimpse of the big picture: “From 1965 to 1995, an average of at least 1 in 5 priests ordained annually were homosexual, a concentration which drove the overall proportion of homosexual men in the priesthood up to 16%, or one in six priests, by the late 1990s.”

In a related publication, Sullins (2020a) used regression modeling to estimate that as of 2015-2018, about 17 percent of priests in the U.S. were homosexual, a one percentage point drift upward over the last 20 years. At the same time, again based on modeling estimates, Sullins concluded that about 8 percent of newly-ordained priests in the 2015-2018 cohort are homosexual in orientation, the lowest rate since the 1950s. The share of homosexual men among newly ordained priests was highest throughout the 1970s and 80s, he demonstrates, but this figure started to diminish considerably beginning in the second half of the 1980s. He predicts: “As the wave of older homosexual priests passes on in coming years, the share of homosexual men in the Catholic priesthood will drop rapidly” (Sullins, 2020a, p. 94).

Such a drop would be in step with new scrutiny placed upon men’s sexual orientation during the “vocational discernment” process, shorthand for the weeding out that occurs among would-be and current Catholic seminarians.³ A decline in homosexual priests would also be in keeping with clear instructions from Pope Benedict XVI in 2005: “Church ...cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called ‘gay culture’” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005). Sexual orientation in this guidance is conceived with some flexibility: previous experience with “homosexual tendencies” is permissible, so long as they were “only the expression of a transitory problem” and have been “clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005, § 2).⁴

At least one social scientist has reasoned that nixing homosexual applicants to the Catholic priesthood “would have enormous implications” on the institutional Church, namely, that excluding homosexual applicants from seminary would create “a major crisis in the Catholic Church” because it would mean “eliminating approximately a quarter to a half of current and future applicants...” (Plante, 2007, pp. 495-496). Were his fears of a collapsing seminarian pool merited? So far—no. Data from diocesan seminaries for whom enrollment information was available between 2009 and 2019 suggest neither overall decline nor growth.

While not a few Catholic leaders in the U.S. prefer Pope Francis’s mixed references about homosexual priests—think of the famous “who am I to judge” reference from a 2013 impromptu in-flight interview—interpreters will be hard-pressed to juxtapose Pope Francis against canon law (or previous pontiffs) on this matter. Priests and seminarians are (still) expected “to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy” (Catholic Church, Can. 277 §1). In a 2019 address, Pope Francis spoke of the need for “genuine purification” and for better formation of priests in holiness and chastity, even quoting at length from *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, Pope Paul VI’s defense of the Church’s tradition of priestly celibacy (Pope Francis, 2019). Instead, it is hypocrisy among Catholic leaders that appears to irritate Francis, who seems to bristle at the public condemnation of sexual sin by those who privately exhibit the same (see Martel, 2019).

Celibacy, Sexuality, and Seminary Culture

Celibacy (or sexual self-restraint) is a habit not only anticipated upon enrollment in seminary but also generally expected for two years before entering the seminary (Kilcawley, 2020). The purpose of celibacy among non-ordained seminarians is not simply about preparing them for the discipline expected of the priesthood. Instead, celibacy aims to develop what Pope Benedict XVI described as “affective maturity,” or the singularity of heart and an undivided love which “will allow him to relate correctly to both men and women, developing in him a true sense of spiritual fatherhood towards the Church community that will be entrusted to him” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005, § 1). For some seminarians and priests, these efforts are more or less difficult.

The Catholic seminary environment can shape and constrain clerical trajectories in terms of sexual habits and attitudes. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI offered rare post-retirement remarks in 2019 on the subject of seminary culture in the 1960s and ‘70s, observing that “In various seminaries, homosexual cliques were established, which acted more or less openly and significantly changed the climate in the seminaries” (Pullella, 2019). The result, he believed, was a “far-reaching breakdown” in standard methods of priestly formation—ones that dovetailed with increasingly permissive sexual norms on the broader culture.

Multiple researchers have reinforced Pope Benedict’s observations about seminaries. Cozzens (2000) argued that there was a sexual “competition” of sorts over the culture of particular Catholic seminaries. Cozzens is credited with coining the term “homosexual subculture” in his 2000 book, a term meant to describe a delimited clique of homosexual men “who interact continually with each other and seldom with outsiders, and who develop shared experiences, understandings, and meanings” (Cozzens, 2000, p. 109). The phenomenon was confirmed by sociologist and priest Andrew Greeley (2004), who noted that Cozzens may have lost his position as a seminary rector for making the controversial claim.

According to Cozzens, such homosexual cliques had become so extensive that they dominated the social life in some seminaries. He maintained that a “tipping point” exists (Gladwell, 2000) in which a dominant heterosexual *or* homosexual subculture will emerge, pressing the other to the edge of the institution or out altogether (see also Hoge & Wenger, 2003, chapter 6). The impulse, Cozzens holds, is less about power struggles between competing groups of seminarians with distinctive visions and more about the usual dynamics that unfold around homophily and the search for an accepting set of friends (McPherson et al., 2001).

Data and Methods

Datasets

Data for this study are from two datasets constructed approximately two decades apart, which allowed us to assess changes over time. The first is the survey of Catholic priests conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2002. The *L.A. Times* conducted a mail survey of priests in 80 dioceses, drawing upon the *Official Catholic Directory* (hereafter OCD). The OCD is the primary repository of Catholic priest data in the U.S. and thus represents the most systematic compilation of contact information on priests in the country. Methodological details are available in the *L.A. Times Archives* (2002). The sampling frame included diocesan priests and those in religious orders, in keeping with their expected proportion in each geographic area. (The sample slightly

overrepresents diocesan priests.) The survey was fielded for 16 weeks, and potential respondents were contacted multiple times. Its response rate was 37 percent, included 1,854 respondents, and was considered statistically representative. Weights were applied afterward to adjust for region-specific non-representativeness. Specifically, the sample slightly underrepresents priests in the Midwest and East, with a modest overrepresentation of those in the South.

The second, more recent data source is the 2020-21 Survey of American Catholic Priests (SACP), which has served as the basis of much recent social research on the Catholic priesthood (Vermurlen et al., 2023a; Vermurlen et al., 2023b). The survey, which the Austin Institute fielded,⁵ included 54 questions, most of which were identical replications from the *L.A. Times* survey. The SACP drew on two sampling frames. First, the OCD's roughly 6,000 clergy email list was rented, and the survey was distributed using Qualtrics in late 2020, with a follow-up reminder sent several weeks later. The same survey was disseminated to a Catholic NGO's clergy list (about 9,000 emails) at the beginning of 2021, with another follow-up email.⁶ The overlap between the two lists was not calculable, as the OCD list was rented and inaccessible to the researchers. Consequently, the exact response rate is unknown, but estimates suggest it was lower than 10 percent.⁷ In the materials, respondents were instructed to complete the survey only once, and Qualtrics blocked repeat survey takers. In all, 1,036 Catholic priests responded to the year of ordination and type of priest questions, which allowed for calculating weights.⁸

Does employing two sampling frames for this more recent dataset warrant skepticism about reliability and representativeness? We do not believe so. While the NGO sample is slightly younger and more diocesan, the weights adjust for this, and when weights are applied, the two samples tell overall stories that are reassuringly similar. In fact, the dual sample-frame design may be a strength because the two samples essentially provide a statistical validity check on each other, as demonstrated below. There is no evidence of a liberal or conservative response bias. About two dozen respondents emailed concerns, primarily with question-wording decisions, with a small handful dealing with a perceived liberal or conservative bias. Both sampling frames included many more progressive priests, and there is no consistent evidence that the two samples affected the overall pattern of responses.

Lastly, an extensive and multidisciplinary literature exists on the benefits and drawbacks of mailed versus online surveys for social science. Findings regarding differential response rates, item nonresponse, data differences, and other metrics are remarkably mixed overall. The most appropriate survey method ultimately is a matter of tradeoffs and prudence based on the target population, available human and financial resources, time requirements, and other considerations (Biffignandi & Bethlehem, 2021; Loomis & Paterson, 2018).

Measures

Outcome Variables

Our study focused on four variables of interest, each of which was asked in both the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey and the 2020-21 SACP. The first two have to do with Catholic priests' perceptions of a homosexual subculture in different aspects of Church life. First, a question asked: "Some people have suggested that there are homosexual subcultures in some seminaries, dioceses, and religious institutes. A 'subculture' refers to a definite group of persons that has its friendships, social gatherings, and vocabulary. Would you say there is a homosexual subculture in your diocese

or religious institute or not? How certain are you?" This question had four response options: "Yes, definitely," "I think so, but I am not positive," "I don't think so," and "No, definitely not."

The next question in the survey protocols was also used. It reads: "Thinking now about the seminary or seminaries you attended, was there a homosexual subculture at the time, or not? How certain are you?" This question used the same four response options as the one about "your diocese or religious institute."

The other two central variables of interest concerned Catholic priests' reports about themselves. One asked about their own sexual orientation using a five-point Kinsey-type spectrum. The question was posed as follows: "Some people think of themselves as heterosexual in orientation, while others think of themselves as homosexual in orientation, and still others feel their sexual orientation lies somewhere in between. How about you?" There were five response options: "Heterosexual orientation," "Somewhere in between, but more on the heterosexual side," "Completely in the middle," "Somewhere in between, but more on the homosexual side," and "Homosexual orientation."

The fourth key measure asked about priests' experiences with celibacy. It was asked: "Which of the following statements most closely describes how you feel about celibacy's role in your life?" Respondents could select one of the following four answers: "Celibacy is not a problem for me, and I do not waver in my vow," "Celibacy takes time to achieve, and I consider it an ongoing journey," "Celibacy is a discipline I try to follow, but do not always succeed," and "Celibacy is not relevant to my priesthood, and I do not observe it." The authors would not have chosen this wording if we were designing a new survey question about priestly celibacy. However, again, the goal of the 2020-21 SACP was to replicate precisely the questions posed to Catholic priests in 2002 by the *Los Angeles Times* survey.

Independent Variables

For much of the study, the predictor variable of interest is the year priests were ordained to the priesthood. Specifically, in the bivariate analyses, ordination years were grouped into cohorts by decade. In regressions, ordination year was left in its granularity such that higher numbers mean priests were ordained more recently.

In regressions, we also employed a dummy variable to indicate priests who belong to a religious order, with diocesan priests as the reference category. Also, a dummy variable was used to indicate non-white priests, using white priests as the reference category. To capture any residual differences between the two subsamples constituting the SACP, we used a dummy variable to indicate priests drawn from the OCD email list, contrasting with priests drawn from the NGO email list. We also used a question for political leanings. The question read: "Would you describe your views on most matters having to do with politics as..." with a 1 to 5 scale of answers ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative."

When our study turns to its fourth outcome (priests' level of commitment to celibacy), the Kinsey-style sexual orientation question—a key outcome variable—is transitioned to a predictor. Specifically, we used dummy variables to represent each response along the Kinsey scale, plus an additional dummy for priests who didn't answer that question. Priests self-reporting as strictly "heterosexual" were the reference category. Likewise, when predicting commitment to celibacy, priests' perceptions of a homosexual subculture during their seminary experience were switched from an outcome of interest to a predictor variable.

Analytic Strategy

Our analysis proceeds in four stages. First, we report univariate findings, as means and simple percentages, for measures employed in this study across three different samples: the 2002 *L.A. Times* sample and the two subsamples constituting the 2020-21 SACP. We then present findings on Catholic priests' perceptions of a homosexual subculture in different aspects of Church life. Thirdly, we focus on priests' self-reported sexual orientations, including a projection of priestly orientations out to 2051. The analysis ends with priests' experiences with celibacy. The latter two sections—on sexual orientations and celibacy—include simple regressions in order to isolate the dynamics of interest. Regressions were conducted using OLS. The result is that these analyses offer a portrait of the American priesthood, with room to predict where it is likely headed on sensitive issues regarding sexuality and celibacy.

It is reasonable to wonder whether Catholic priests, of all people, would be honest on a survey that queried them about their sexual orientation and behavior, particularly given the practices of secrecy that can take root in the Church on this issue (Tricou, 2018). Greeley wondered the same in *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (2004), based in no small part on the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey. Echoing his colleagues at the National Opinion Research Center, Greeley held that—so long as they are guaranteed anonymity—people tend to be frank about their sexuality. We hold the same assessment. However, the environment for discussing such behavior since 2002 has not favored Catholic priests (see Plante and McChesney, 2011). Many feel embattled, even when guilty of nothing. Nevertheless, these are the data at hand, and we do well to interpret these data at face value, yet recognizing they are not without limitations.

Results

Weighted Averages and Percentages by Sample

Table 1 compares weighted univariate findings—reported as percentages (for dichotomous measures) or means—for basic demographics (i.e., age) and the variables used in the following analyses. These findings are listed for three samples: the 2002 *Los Angeles Times* data, our sample from late 2020 drawn from the OCD frame, and our follow-up sample from 2021 using the NGO email list. This initial presentation of findings is meant to highlight similarities and differences in the samples. We will see some notable differences between the 2002 *Times* sample and the two more recent samples, whereas the two recent samples are mostly statistically indistinguishable.

First, we look at measures unrelated to sexuality. Priests belonging to a religious order represent 32 percent of responding priests in all three samples. All three samples also report a mean age of 59 or 60 years. However, the 2002 *L.A. Times* sample noted 5 or 6 more years since ordination on average, reflecting the contemporary pattern of slightly older ages at ordination. The mean ordination year for priests in the 2002 data was 1967, while the mean ordination year in the recent samples was in the early 1990s. Non-white priests were slightly more common in the recent NGO sample (at 11 percent) than in the 2002 *Times* dataset (at 6 percent), but the difference in the proportions of non-white priests in the two recent samples was not statistically significant. Priests in the two recent samples were notably more conservative on matters of politics than were priests surveyed in 2002, which reflects a broader turn toward conservative views in the American Catholic priesthood (Vermurlen et al., 2023b), while Catholic priests in the two recent samples were indistinguishable on political leanings.

As for the sexuality-related measures, priests sampled from the NGO email list were less likely to report a homosexual subculture in their present diocese or religious institute compared to both the 2020 OCD sample and the 2002 *L.A. Times* sample. In contrast, both recent samples were more likely than the 2002 sample, on average, to remember a homosexual subculture in their seminary at the time they attended. Although this might sound as if the presence of homosexual subcultures in Catholic seminaries has been increasing, it must be remembered that the question asked about the presence of a homosexual subculture when the respondent was in seminary. While the mean is higher today, we will see shortly that this measure is strongly patterned by the decade in which priests were ordained (and thus when they were in seminary), and when analyzed in that light, the evident pattern is one of steady decline.

On a five-point Kinsey-type scale of sexual orientation, the three samples are statistically indistinguishable, at least in univariate analyses. The average on the Kinsey scale is statistically the same across all three samples. Moreover, specific sexual orientations display stability. For instance, in both 2002 and the two recent samples, 71 percent of priests report being strictly heterosexual. About 7 percent say they are “somewhere in between, but more on the homosexual side,” and 9 percent identify as strictly homosexual. These findings reinforce earlier suggestions that the Catholic priesthood displays nonheterosexuality at levels notably higher than the surrounding population.⁹ Finally, priestly celibacy is less of a struggle today than it was 20 years ago, on average. American priests today, whether sampled from the OCD or NGO, are more likely than priests in 2002 to report that celibacy is not a problem for them, and they do not waver in their vow, but this figure remains a minority of priests.

To boost the sample size in the present study and owing to the marked similarity between the two recent samples, we pool the 2020 OCD and 2021 NGO samples from this point forward.

Priests’ Perceptions of Homosexual Subcultures

Next, we look more closely at priests’ perceptions of homosexual subcultures in different components of Church life. Figure 1 shows priests’ perceptions of a homosexual subculture in their diocese or religious institute. The survey questions in each administration asked about the presence of a homosexual subculture presently, that is, when the survey was completed, so that we can present a direct comparison of 2002 versus 2020-21 findings. The results indicate that priests are less likely today than in 2002 to perceive a homosexual subculture in their diocese or institute and that this change is mainly driven by a rise in priests saying “I don’t think so,” which jumped from 42 to 49 percent over the last two decades. All the other response options, whether on the side of “no” or “yes,” saw a slight drop.

It was just noted (in the previous section) that Catholic priests in 2020-21 are more likely, on average, to say there was a homosexual subculture in their seminary than were priests surveyed in 2002. We noted that this finding masks the whole story because the question asked about the presence of a homosexual subculture at the time the responding priest was in seminary, and ordination cohorts strongly pattern this measure. Figure 2 depicts Catholic priests’ perceptions of a homosexual subculture inside the seminary they attended, asking them to think back to their time there, broken down by decades of ordination.

Looking at this figure, it is understandable that Catholic priests surveyed in 2002 are less apt, on average, to report that their seminary experience revealed a homosexual subculture compared to priests surveyed in 2020-21. For one thing, priests ordained in the 1950s and 60s (and surveyed in 2002) are comparatively quite unlikely to say their seminary had a homosexual

subculture, which pulls the mean down in the 2002 dataset. More generally, the 2020-21 bars are visibly higher overall than the 2002 bars.

Table 1. Comparison of Weighted Univariate Estimates from Three Samples (means or percent)

	Range	<i>LA Times</i> 2002	OCD 2020	NGO 2021
Religious priest (rather than diocesan)	0,1	0.32	0.32	0.32
Age (years)		60.85 ^b	60.75	59.37
Years since ordination		33.48 ^{a b}	28.64	27.91
Mean ordination date		1967.52 ^{a b}	1991.36	1992.09
Non-white	0,1	0.06 ^b	0.08	0.11
Politically conservative	1-5	2.93 ^{a b}	3.32	3.38
Homosexual subculture in diocese or institute	1-4	2.52 ^b	2.55 ^c	2.39
Homosexual subculture when R was in Seminary	1-4	2.05 ^{a b}	2.56	2.53
Kinsey scale	1-5	1.75	1.73	1.76
Heterosexual	0,1	0.71	0.71	0.71
Heterosexual (or mostly heterosexual) vs. neither	0,1	0.79	0.81	0.77
In the middle/Bisexual	0,1	0.05	0.04	0.06
Mostly homosexual	0,1	0.07	0.06	0.07
Homosexual	0,1	0.09	0.10	0.09
Celibacy mean	1-4	1.86 ^{a b}	1.71	1.68
Celibacy is not a problem and does not waver in vow	0,1	0.34 ^{a b}	0.41	0.45

A superscript ^a indicates the mean scores displayed in column 2 (L.A. Times, 2002) are statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 3 (OCD, 2020), without additional controls.

A superscript ^b indicates that the mean scores displayed in column 2 (L.A. Times, 2002) are statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 4 (NGO, 2021), without additional controls.

A superscript ^c indicates that the mean scores displayed in column 3 (OCD, 2020) are statistically significantly different ($p < 0.05$) from the same in column 4 (NGO, 2021), without additional controls.

However, the most evident pattern concerns the rise and fall over the decades. Answers of “Yes, definitely” and “I think so, but I am not positive” were relatively rare for priests ordained before 1970, but those affirmative answers became more common up to a peak among priests ordained in the 1980s. However, the trend reversed, and affirmative answers trail off substantially as ordinations (and thus seminary experiences) approach the present day. In short, when priests are asked to think back to their seminary days and whether there was a homosexual subculture there, the trend shows that homosexual subcultures in seminaries have been declining steadily since the 1980s, as far as priests’ memories and perceptions go.

Figure 1. Priests’ perceptions of a homosexual subculture in their diocese or religious institute, 2002 vs 2020-21 data. Includes 95 percent confidence intervals.

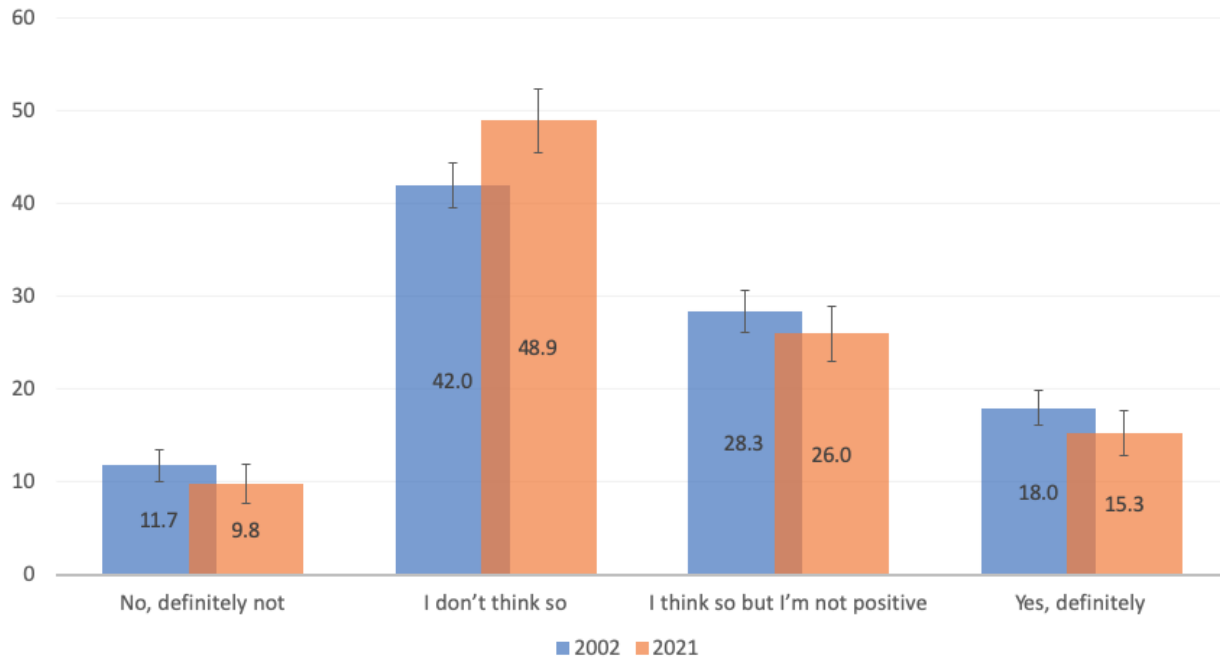
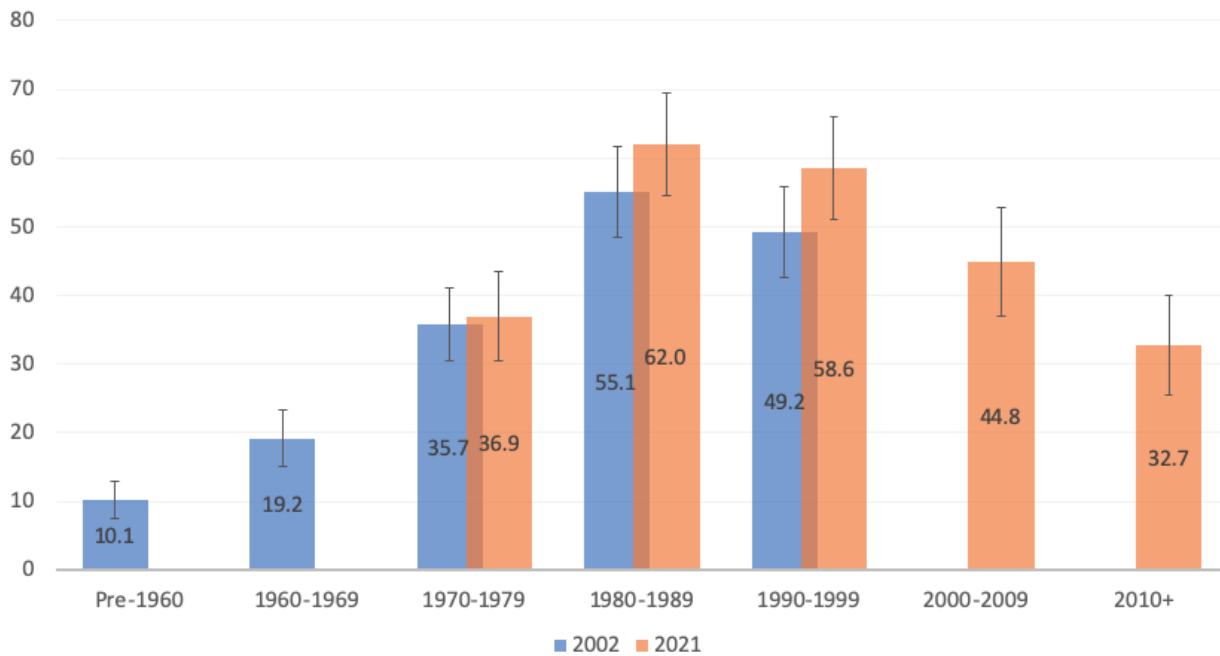


Figure 2. Priests’ perceptions of a homosexual subculture (“at the time”) in the Seminary they attended. Bars represent “Yes, definitely” and are grouped with “I think so, but I am not positive.” Includes 95 percent confidence intervals.



Priests' Self-Reported Sexual Orientations

The univariate findings in Table 1 above indicated that the patterns of self-reported sexual orientations among Catholic priests have not changed between 2002 and the SACP fielded in 2020-21. Nevertheless, looking at priests' sexual orientations based on the decade they were ordained to the priesthood reveals the fuller story.¹⁰ The self-reported sexual orientations of Catholic priests in the 2002 data, separated out by decade of ordination, are depicted in Figure 3.

The findings here show that heterosexuality was most common among priests ordained before 1960, about 80 percent of whom reported being strictly heterosexual. In that cohort, 6 percent reported being homosexual or "more on the homosexual side." Starting with ordinations in the 1960s, heterosexuality declined and homosexuality increased in the priest population. This pattern of rising homosexuality (along with declining heterosexuality) continued into the 1980s when heterosexuality among newly ordained priests was down to around 60 percent. Starting sometime in the 1980s, this trend reversed, with heterosexuality becoming more common among new priests and the proportion of recently ordained homosexual priests beginning to decline, as reflected in the 1990s cohort.

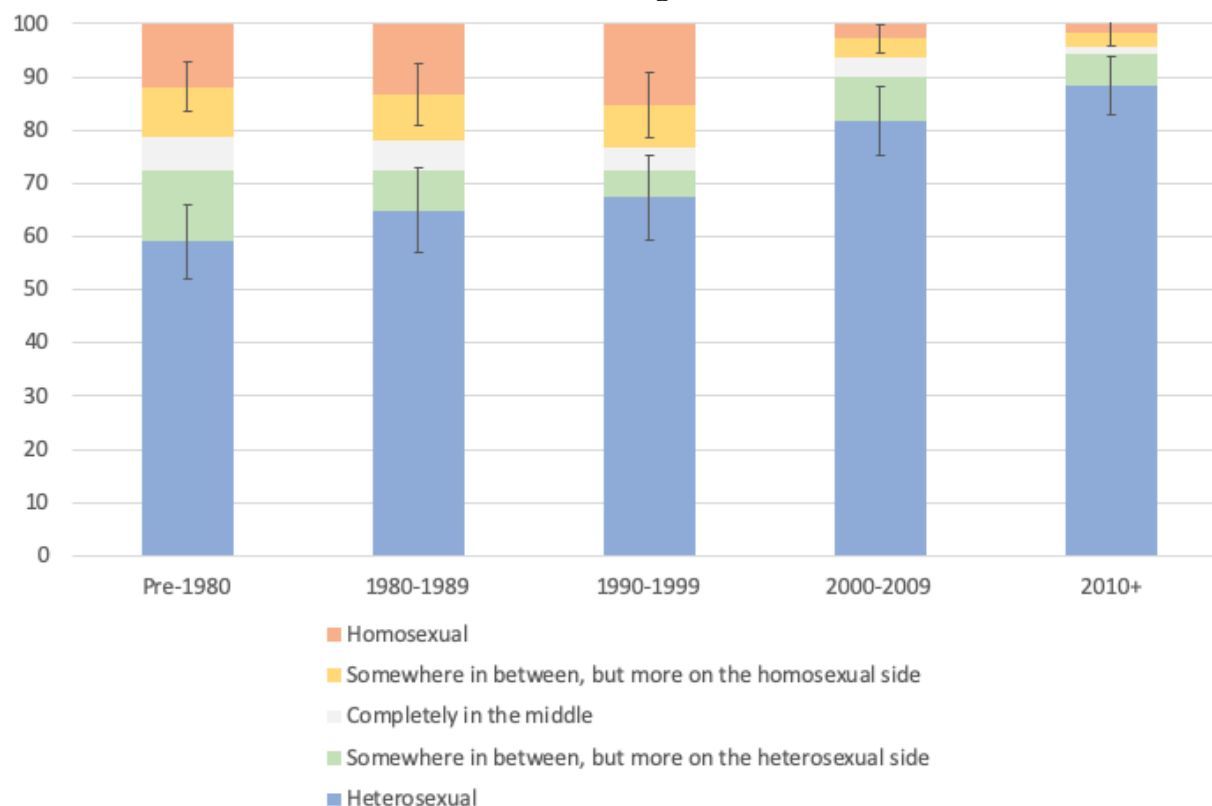
Figure 3. Self-reported sexual orientations among priests by decade of ordination (2002 data). Includes 95 percent confidence intervals for "Heterosexual" and "Homosexual" categories.



The trend of diminishing homosexuality is confirmed in the 2020-21 survey. Figure 4 depicts the self-reported sexual orientations of Catholic priests, broken down by decade of ordination, using only the recent dataset. As should be evident—and keeping with claims made earlier by Sullins—these findings show a homosexual orientation is notably more common among ordinations before the year 2000—between 12 and 15 percent—than it is after them (2 to 3 percent). The same is true of respondents’ selection of the category “somewhere in between, but more on the homosexual side,” where pre-2000 ordinations comprise 8 to 9 percent of respondents while only about 3 percent of more recent ordinations.

From the other angle, heterosexuality was least common among American Catholic priests ordained in the 1970s and 80s, roughly 60 percent of whom said they were strictly heterosexual. The percentage of priests who are heterosexual has increased with each successive cohort, reaching 88 percent among those ordained in 2010 or later.

Figure 4. Self-reported sexual orientations among priests by decade of ordination (2020-21 data). Includes 95 percent confidence intervals for “Heterosexual” and “Homosexual” categories.



In principle, it would seem possible that these bivariate trends can be accounted for by other confounding factors, such as the long-observed conservative turn in the American Catholic priesthood (Vermurlen et al., 2023b), but regression analysis shows this is not the case. We employed regression analysis to explore a small number of factors that might be theorized to reflect differing propensities toward heterosexuality or homosexuality among priests. The results are shown in Table 2.

For both the 2002 dataset and the 2020-21 SACP, non-white priests were less likely to lean toward the homosexual side of the Kinsey spectrum compared to white priests. Likewise, in both 2002 and 2021, reporting a more conservative political stance meant being less likely to lean toward the homosexual side of the Kinsey spectrum. Catholic priests belonging to a religious order were modestly more likely to lean toward homosexuality in the recent dataset, but this pattern was not statistically significant in the 2002 *Times* data.

Most importantly for our focus and reflecting the turnaround in sexual orientations among ordination cohorts just shown, the 2002 data revealed a positive trend toward homosexuality by ordination year (even with the evident shift away from priestly homosexuality after the 1980s), whereas, in the more recent dataset, the association between ordination year and homosexuality had switched signs to a negative trendline.

Table 2. Predictors of Sexual Orientation, 2002 and 2020-21

	2002 L.A. Times (1)	2020-21 SACP (2)
Ordained more recently	0.261*** (0.040)	-0.142* (0.064)
Non-white	-0.105** (0.035)	-0.133** (0.042)
Religious priest (rather than diocesan)	0.012 (0.018)	0.071* (0.030)
Politically conservative	-0.256*** (0.035)	-0.317*** (0.052)
OCD sample (rather than NGO)		-0.007 (0.025)
Constant	0.173*** (0.031)	0.460*** (0.050)
Observations	1,650	742
R ²	0.057	0.114
Adjusted R ²	0.055	0.108
Residual Std. Error	0.330 (df = 1645)	0.312 (df = 736)
F Statistic	24.947*** (df = 4; 1645)	18.896*** (df = 5; 736)
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001		
The outcome is a five-point scale, with low=heterosexual and high=homosexual		

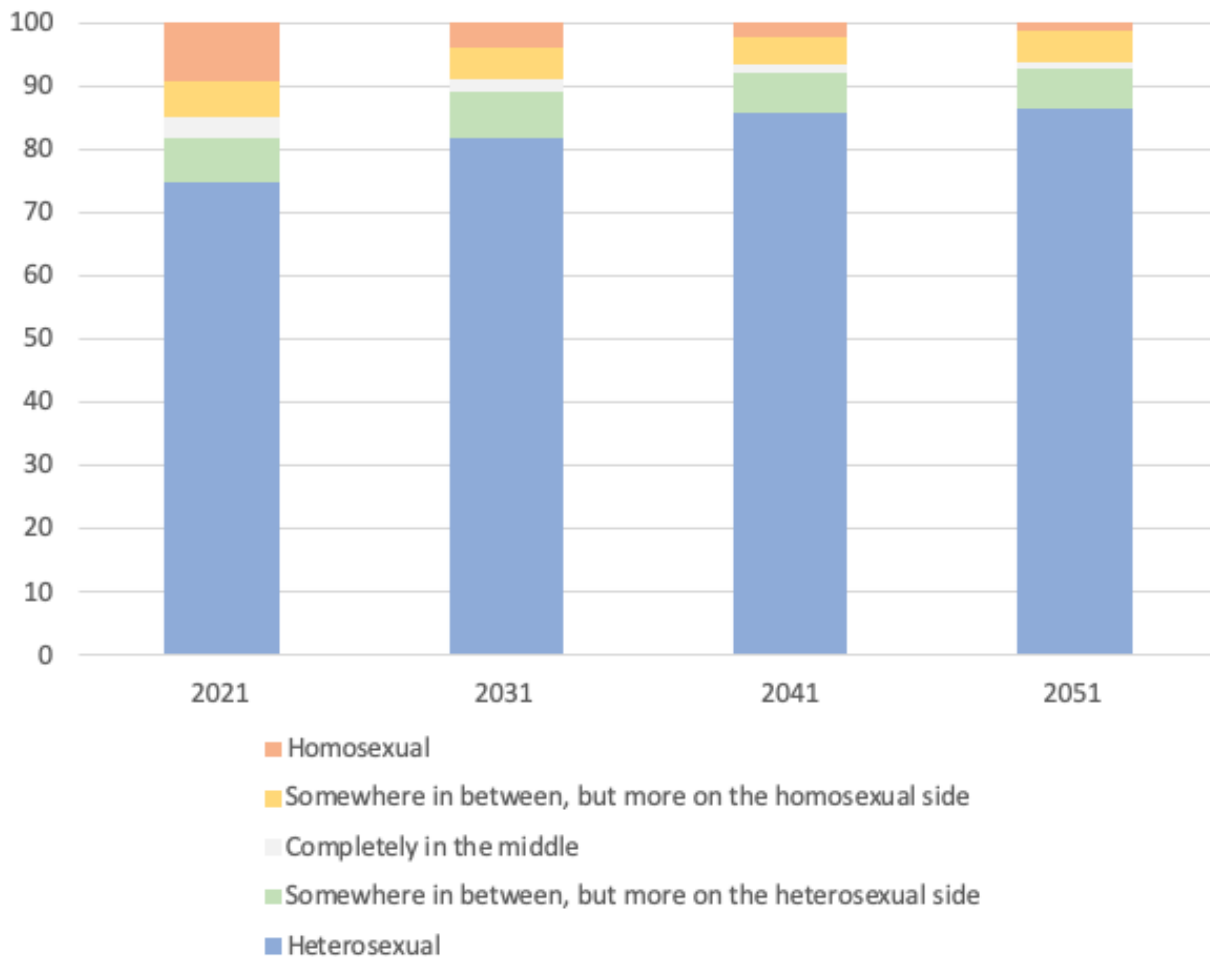
Furthermore, we used the 2020-21 SACP dataset to offer a projection of sexual orientations among American Catholic priests into the future, out to 2051. These projections are depicted in Figure 5. What appears here are not ordination cohorts but sequential (projected) snapshots of the priest population in general. Any projection must set a point at which respondents exit the pool, and for this projection, we chose age 70, the age at which many priests begin to become inactive.¹¹ Note that by 2041, the share of Catholic priests who would self-identify as either entirely or mostly heterosexual should amount to over 92 percent, whereas those who would self-identify as either entirely or primarily homosexual is projected to shrink to about 7 percent.

Priests' Experiences with Celibacy

As a final topic, we examined Catholic priests' experiences with celibacy. Figure 6 depicts findings for this measure, separated out by self-reported sexual orientations, using the 2020-21

data. The bottom category—“Celibacy is not a problem for me, and I do not waver in my vow”—was chosen by about half of strictly heterosexual priests, with all other sexual orientations coming in at a lower percentage ranging down to 24 percent among strictly homosexual priests. At the other extreme, very few Catholic priests reported that “Celibacy is not relevant to my priesthood, and I do not observe it,” reaching a high of 3 percent among homosexual priests. Homosexual priests were also the most likely to report, “Celibacy is a discipline I try to follow, but do not always succeed,” at 21 percent. Neither the 2002 nor the 2020-21 surveys probe further here, querying the nature or frequency of non-celibate behavior.

Figure 5. Sexual orientations among active priests, 2021 to 2051 (projected)

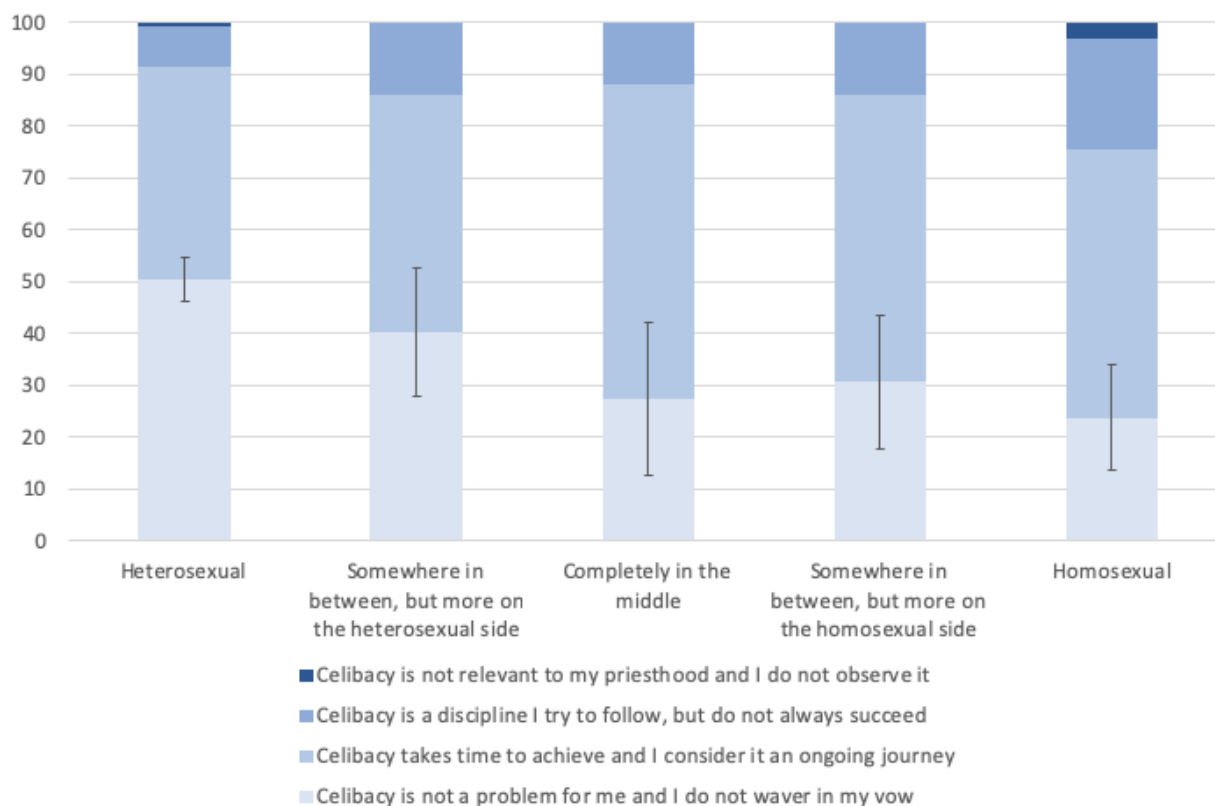


Regression analyses revealed that, in both the 2002 and 2020-21 datasets, a diminished commitment to celibacy is linked to perceiving a homosexual subculture in one’s seminary. Also, a diminished commitment to celibacy is associated with self-reporting as homosexual. In the 2002 data, self-reporting as “Somewhere in between but more on the homosexual side” was likewise significantly associated with a diminished commitment to celibacy, but this measure was weaker to the point of non-significance in the more recent survey. Being conservative on political topics was significantly linked with a more significant commitment to celibacy in both surveys, but the magnitude of this predictor was notably higher in 2002 than in 2020-21.

Discussion

The presence of and dynamics around homosexuality in the Catholic priesthood have been a longstanding interest to many scholars and religion-observers (e.g., Kappler et al., 2013; Martel, 2019; Plante, 2007; Wolf, 1989). Our study has been organized around a simple empirical question: Is homosexuality in the priesthood diminishing? Perceptions of a homosexual subculture in one's diocese or religious institute are down since 2002, with comparatively more priests responding "I don't think so" when asked about the presence of such a group. Priests' perceptions of a homosexual subculture in their seminary *at the time they attended* is notably up, in the aggregate, since priests were surveyed in 2002. However, this rise can be explained by the oldest priests, for whom that perception was uncommon, leaving the priest population. When this question is conditioned upon the decade in which priests were ordained, it is clear that perceptions of a homosexual subculture in seminaries have been steadily declining, following a peak among priests who were ordained in the 1980s.

Figure 6. Priests' experiences with celibacy by sexual orientation (2020-21 data). Includes 95 percent confidence intervals for the "Celibacy is not a problem for me" category.



Aside from priests' perceptions of homosexual subcultures, this study showed that although the aggregate level of homosexuality in the American priest population is unchanged since 2002, again, a clear trend based on ordination cohorts is discernable. Homosexuality increased (and heterosexuality decreased) by ordination cohorts up through the 1980s. Since then, priests who are strictly heterosexual have become more common with each successive cohort,

reaching 88 percent among those ordained in 2010 or later. The recent data demonstrate that priests who are strictly or predominantly homosexual were notably more common among ordinations before the year 2000, after which homosexuality among newly ordained priests became far less common. With these new ordination patterns, homosexuality can be expected to drop in the aggregate, too. Our projection showed that by 2041, priests who self-identify as either entirely or mostly homosexual are expected to shrink to roughly 7 percent.

Moreover, we provided updated insights about Catholic priests’ experiences with celibacy (Schoenherr, 2002; Sipe, 1990/2003; Greeley, 2004). Very few priests today dismiss celibacy as irrelevant for themselves. Broadly speaking, it is homosexual priests, priests who perceived a homosexual subculture in their seminary experience, and politically liberal priests who trended toward a diminished commitment to celibacy. These findings align with recent research showing homosexual priests are less likely to agree with Church teachings on matters of sexual morality (Vermurlen et al., 2023b). As one Catholic writer observed, “Men who lived lives of intellectual deception, pretending they accepted Church teachings with which they disagreed, and that they had no intention of promoting, learned to live lives of deception in their sexual conduct as well” (Weigel, 2017, p. 283). To be sure, priestly disagreement with Church teachings on sexuality is linked with divergence in one’s own actions as well—regardless of any conclusions about causal directions between the two. Catholic priests who dissent in one domain of churchly life are far more likely to dissent in others.

Our findings comport with recent emphases in studies of culture and religion on cohort replacement as the crucial driver of population-level change. In brief, there is less evidence of contemporaneous influences on cultural change—that people change their minds and behaviors in accordance with developments around them—than there is on an “acquired dispositions” model favoring the enculturation of persons comparatively early in life (Vaisey & Lizardo, 2016). Likewise, when religion changes in any given population, it is likely the product of cohort replacement (Voas & Chaves, 2016). The present study pinpoints cohorts as pivotal to changes in the population of Catholic priests as well. Transformations in the composition of the priestly population in the U.S. will be strongly driven by cohort changes rather than patterns of individual priests changing their own relationships to sexuality and celibacy.

What, more precisely than these cohort dynamics, might be said about the causes of this ongoing cohort-based diminishment in homosexual priests? Ordination to the Catholic priesthood is a decision not just of the men pursuing the priesthood but also of the Church itself. While our data cannot directly address causation, it seems clear that a dual-selection process is likely at work. On one side, the Church hierarchy has made it clear, at least since 2005 (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005), that men with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” should not be admitted to seminary or holy orders. Therefore, authorities (seminary rectors, vocations directors, etc.) likely have increased scrutiny. On the other side, it seems just as likely that homosexual men may be self-selecting out of the process from the start. Due to a variety of institutional or cultural factors, the priesthood may be less attractive to homosexual men than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Table 3. Predictors of Diminished Commitment to Celibacy, 2002 and 2020-21

	2002 L.A. Times (1)	2002 L.A. Times (2)	2020-21 SACP (3)	2020-21 SACP (4)
Ordained more recently	0.071* (0.030)	-0.052 (0.032)	-0.043 (0.045)	-0.019 (0.044)
Non-white	-0.027 (0.025)	0.0003 (0.025)	0.019 (0.029)	0.039 (0.028)
Religious priest (rather than diocesan)	-0.011 (0.013)	-0.008 (0.013)	0.032 (0.021)	0.035 (0.020)
Politically conservative	-0.302*** (0.026)	-0.250*** (0.025)	-0.118** (0.036)	-0.093** (0.036)
OCD sample (rather than NGO)			0.012 (0.018)	0.012 (0.017)
Perceived a homosexual subculture in their Seminary		0.112*** (0.019)		0.138*** (0.024)
SO: Homosexual		0.153*** (0.021)		0.094** (0.030)
SO: Somewhere in between, but more on the homosexual side		0.150*** (0.023)		0.062 (0.033)
SO: Completely in the middle		0.034 (0.027)		0.075 (0.039)
SO: Somewhere in between, but more on the heterosexual side		-0.010 (0.020)		0.036 (0.030)
SO: Skipped orientation question		-0.050 (0.039)		0.029 (0.031)
Constant	0.404*** (0.023)	0.381*** (0.022)	0.306*** (0.035)	0.181*** (0.039)
Observations	1,688	1,688	797	797
R ²	0.080	0.149	0.035	0.095
Adjusted R ²	0.077	0.144	0.029	0.082
Residual Std. Error	0.244 (df = 1683)	0.235 (df = 1677)	0.225 (df = 791)	0.219 (df = 785)
F Statistic	36.362*** (df = 4; 1683)	29.359*** (df = 10; 1677)	5.739*** (df = 5; 791)	7.475*** (df = 11; 785)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Limitations

The present study has limitations, which merit acknowledgment. First, whereas the 2002 *L.A. Times* survey of priests was designed using a stratified random sampling method, the 2020-21 Survey of American Catholic Priests used a non-probability sampling method. It is difficult to collect national-level survey data from Catholic priests, especially without the backing of some formal office or committee of the Church. In the end, we would have liked the response rate (and thus the final sample size) of the SACP to be larger. Additionally, although the dual-sample structure of the SACP might be uncommon, we took measures to ensure this did not pose endemic concerns, such as employing weights and controlling for any differences in the subsamples in all regression models. On the positive side, the remarkably similar findings between the recent OCD and NGO subsamples give us confidence that the aggregated SACP dataset is tapping into the reality of the priesthood today.

Lastly, the demonstrated connection between homosexual orientation and a diminished commitment to celibacy requires some caution. Within the Catholic context, priests have an institutional incentive to hide both, so there could be potential confounding in the association due to reporting bias. The data on sexual orientations and experiences with celibacy are self-reported measures from priests, and priests who feel the need to hide one would probably feel the need to hide the other. On logical grounds, that alone would contribute to the statistical tie between self-reported homosexuality and a diminished commitment to celibacy. However, it is unknown to what extent—if at all—respondent priests have concealed the truth.

Conclusion

The Catholic priesthood, in recent times, has been conceptualized as a “closet” for homosexual men (Martel, 2019; Tricou, 2018). The disproportionate presence of such men in the priesthood has been a continual topic of fascination, concern, and hope, representing competing visions and logics within the Catholic Church (see Reay & Hinings, 2009). With this study, we now have systematic evidence that homosexuality in the American Catholic priesthood is diminishing, at least in terms of the declining share of homosexual priests among recent successive cohorts. As these and future cohorts of newly ordained priests compound, and as older priests exit the priest population, we should expect the percentage of homosexual men to decline noticeably in the aggregate as well, as reflected in our projection.

The full and multifaceted implications for the Catholic Church remain to be seen. At a minimum, this study can speak to the increasing success of the Catholic Church’s institutional goals and processes. The findings indicate that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is getting closer to adhering consistently to its own stated policy of excluding homosexual men from the priesthood. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the worldwide Church has held that homosexual men, even if not sexually active, are not suitable for ordination (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1974, especially § 21; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005). The Church, within the bounds of the U.S. at least, appears to be implementing that policy more effectively in recent years than in the past. We encourage further research to ascertain if this pattern continues in the U.S. and whether a similar pattern can be found in other national contexts.

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Notes

- ¹ We use the terms “homosexuality” and “homosexual” in this paper, despite the more common use of other terms (e.g., “gay”) in broader academic parlance, in part because Church documents tend to privilege the word, but more because comparatively few Catholic clergy use terms like “gay” to describe themselves or their fellows who experience same-sex attractions. Being gay is not simply about the presence of same-sex attractions or behavior; it’s also about the adoption of a community and culture (Ward, 2015). “Gay” tends to refer not only to a self-identity but also to a broader subculture that most Catholic clergy do not embrace.
- ² Part of the reason for imprecision in these estimates, as will be clarified below, could stem from different ways of conceiving “homosexual priests.” For instance, if priests who are not strictly heterosexual are perceived as belonging to this phenomenon, that would push the estimate quite a bit higher.
- ³ Of course, many leave the seminary for other reasons.
- ⁴ These 2005 instructions “did not impose a new discipline in the matter but simply clarified earlier teaching” (Sullins, 2020a, p. 112).
- ⁵ Regnerus is a paid staff member of the Austin Institute and consulted on the survey but was not the impetus for its administration.
- ⁶ Few NGOs are apt to give email lists away to researchers. Efforts to secure access to such a list were successful at one NGO, which stipulated that it remain an anonymous source. Its identity is moot owing to the similarity of the two samples, as discussed below.
- ⁷ Assuming no overlap between the two lists, the survey was sent to roughly 15,000 email addresses. If there was a lot of overlap resulting in a smaller pool (say, 11,000 email addresses), the final response size of 1,036 would still equate to a response rate under 10 percent.
- ⁸ For weight construction, a dataset derived from the OCD annual book (distinct from the OCD email list) was constructed by scraping the OCD and using regular expressions to extract the number of religious vs. diocesan priests and the distribution of ordination dates. For weighting purposes, ordination dates were binned into the categories of 1980 and before, 1981-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-2010, and 2011+. Weights were constructed using the rake method with the R package *aneksrake* and validated by the *survey* package. Three sets of weights were calculated. First, weights specific to the OCD data frame were calculated, followed by weights for the NGO; finally, weights for both datasets combined were calculated.
- ⁹ The same Kinsey scale was fielded to a nationally representative sample of American adults (ages 20 to 65) in 2018, which is publicly available on The ARDA (<https://thearda.com/data-archive?fid=AUSTIN18>). On a five-point scale from 1 “heterosexual” to 5 “homosexual,” the weighted mean for American men ages 20 to 65 was 1.30. Limiting the analysis to men ages 28 to 65, to mirror more closely the priest population, resulted in the same mean, 1.30. This is in contrast to a mean around 1.75 among priests in the U.S., that is, further along the spectrum away from heterosexuality. Looking with more granularity, 93 percent of men in general reported being heterosexual or predominantly heterosexual, compared to about 79 percent of priests in the U.S.; likewise, 5 percent of men in general reported being homosexual or mostly homosexual, compared to 16 percent among American priests.
- ¹⁰ We used decade of ordination rather than age because, as Table 1 highlights, age at ordination has shifted some and because priestly cohorts matter. Older seminarians experience the same culture (e.g.,

the same professors, milieu, etc.), the same ordination process, and the same bishop as their younger colleagues.

¹¹ We performed a cohort-component projection, with priests entering the 30–39-year-old cohort acting as “entrances” into the priest population and reaching the age of 70 as “exits.” The size of and distribution of sexual orientations within each new 30–39-year-old cohort was assumed to be the same as the cohort just before it. The projections were generated by simulating the process of successive cohort replacement. Given that the new “entrances” are assumed to remain constant into the future, this projection is moving toward a stable population configuration, in which all cohorts look like the youngest cohort 30 years prior. Actual priest deaths (before age 70), leaving the priesthood, and joining at later ages are all assumed to be negligible. More sophisticated projections would need to take these into account. Nevertheless, this basic analysis employing age-based cohort replacement provides a baseline estimate relying on simple yet reasonable assumptions.