

## RELIGION

Rev. John McNeill, a Jesuit priest expelled by the Vatican over the issue of homosexuality.

# Rome rips homosexuality; Catholic gays fight back

By Beth Maschinot

**L**AST NOVEMBER, AFTER THE CATHOLIC Hierarchy issued a particularly vitriolic pastoral letter on homosexuality, Jim Bussen found himself in an awkward position. Usually a man who likes to work within the system, Bussen found himself at loggerheads with the Vatican. And as national president of Dignity, a Catholic gay rights group, Bussen registered his anger in media interviews.

As the controversy heated up, Bussen would go to work at the Railroad Retirement Board in Chicago unsure of what kind of reception he'd get from his fellow workers, most of whom were straight; but he was soon surprised. "There was a strong anti-Catholic backlash at work, not an anti-gay one," he says. "Some people told me, 'What the church says about gays stinks. Why don't you leave it?' But one woman said, 'Don't let them off the hook. You've got to stay and fight.' And that's what we've been doing."

In the past decade, groups like Dignity have been inching out of the church's well-built closet. The Vatican's latest, and perhaps harshest, attack on lesbians and gay men seems targeted to drive them back in. Yet it may have the opposite effect, as angry gays join other Catholics disgusted by an increasingly hard-line Vatican.

The Catholic Church's latest blast at gays is found in a pastoral letter issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in late October. (The CDF is the historical successor to the Inquisition, and John Paul II's reign has perhaps been the CDF's busiest era in this century, stamping out modern "heresies.") The document openly admits that it is out to squelch what it calls

the "over benign interpretation given to the homosexual condition, with some going so far as to call it neutral, or even good." Though the CDF doesn't name names, Catholic observers say the Vatican is out to put a stop to a distinction made in a 1976 U.S. bishops' letter between homosexual orientation (which it called "neutral") and homosexual behavior (which it called "immoral"). Dignity, New Ways Ministry and other gay advocacy groups, as well as many liberal theologians, have gone ever further than the letter. They pronounce both sexual orientations a "gift from God" and, therefore, something to be developed and integrated by the person.

The Vatican will have none of this. Written in English instead of the usual working languages of Italian or Latin, the CDF statement calls homosexuality "more or less a strong tendency ordered toward intrinsic moral evil, and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder." In other words, there will be no more tiptoeing around about "orientation vs. behavior."

Bussen and others think that the recent statement, though quite vicious, is at least consistent. "They had to go one way or the other with it, saying that either it's bad to be a homosexual and to act like one, or it's good all the way. They changed their premises to fit their conclusion."

**Blaming the victims:** But there were other statements beyond this theologizing that especially riled gay leaders. The Vatican took a swipe at "pressure groups" like Dignity and New Ways Ministry and implicitly blamed them for contributing to the AIDS crisis. In the Vatican's words: "Even when the practice of homosexuality may seriously threaten the lives and well-being of a large number of people, its advocates remain undeterred and refuse to consider the mag-

nitude of the risks involved." In a wonderful bit of irony, this section of victim-blaming is followed by the terse sentence: "The church can never be so callous." A Vatican spokesman gladly cleared up the vagueness of the statement by telling the Italian press that the "risks" reference was indeed to AIDS.

In what is seen as an incitement to gay-bashing, the Vatican added, "When civil rights legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the church nor society at large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground and violent reactions increase." Three weeks after the release of this statement, the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project said attacks against gays had doubled from 1985 to 1986 in New York City, and similar groups across the country have also noted dramatic increases in gay-bashing.

In the past month, U.S. bishops have begun to act on the recommendations of the letter, attempting to distance themselves from organizations like Dignity. Four dioceses have expelled Dignity chapters from their local parishes. More expulsions are expected as the bishops heed the spirit and letter of the document.

In some dioceses, the hierarchy is backing a group called Courage in the hopes that it will usurp Dignity's function for gay Catholics. Courage more strictly adheres to the Vatican's anti-sexuality line, calling on gay Catholics to remain celibate.

Dignity, usually given to working behind the scenes in a bid for church acceptance, has been radicalized by the church's spiraling anti-gay tenor. At a national meeting February 7, representatives from the 5,000-member group voted to fight the expulsions by picketing at local churches and by beginning a "gay dollars" campaign. If all goes as planned, parish priests across the country will soon be receiving messages in their weekly collections that say "my usual contribution of X dollars has been channelled to the lesbian and gay community."

**Anti-gay actions:** Though the expulsions are the precipitating cause for Dignity's action, the church's anti-gay stance in the past year has also been signalled by other events. They include:

- The expulsion of Jesuit priest John McNeill for refusing to obey an order of silence on the issue of homosexuality. In 1975

McNeill wrote *The Church and the Homosexual*, a book widely acclaimed by liberal Catholics for addressing the issue of the church's treatment of gays. Though McNeill had obeyed a 10-year ban on publicly speaking about gays in the church following publication of his book, the recent Vatican statement led him to break the ban and criticize the hierarchy's "mean and cruel spirit." As he told the *National Catholic Reporter*, "They have become very paranoid in their approach."

- The sacking of a St. Cloud, Minn., priest for airing his views on homosexuality in a diocesan newspaper. Wrote Rev. Bill Dorn, "We have a responsibility to develop a theology of sexuality that sees it as a blessing, and sees homosexuality as part of the gift." Dorn was subsequently stripped of his priestly powers; his bishop asserted that his views conflicted with those of the church.

- The push by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin to block the passage of a gay-rights ordinance in Chicago. At least five bishops have supported similar ordinances across the country and gay-rights advocates expected Bernardin, who is known as a liberal, at least to remain neutral. Bussen says Bernardin promised as much before the vote, but then "betrayed the gay community" by politicking for the bill's demise with aldermen from heavily Catholic wards.

- The recent reprisals against theologian Charles Curran of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, Wash., which were due, in part, to their views on homosexuality.

- The lack of church response to the AIDS crisis, including recent news of priests with AIDS being made pariahs in some dioceses.

**Sex and power:** The recent anti-gay actions must be set in the context of an already homophobic church that's been increasingly keen on squelching dissent on sexual matters. But the changing demographics of the Catholic clergy may add a new wrinkle to this issue.

Kevin Gordon, head of the Consultation on Homosexuality, Social Justice and Roman Catholic Theology, estimates that 30 percent to 40 percent of new recruits to the clergy are gay. "When I quote that figure in talks during vocations meetings, invariably vocations directors come up and ask me why I quote such a low figure," says Gordon, a pro-

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## Experts say the number of gay priests is on the rise

Though dioceses are unlikely to commission any scientific studies in the near future, the number of gay priests and brothers appears to be on the rise in recent years, seminarians and clergy told *In These Times*. Ethics professor Dan Maguire of Marquette University said this trend is "not out of the goodness of Rome's heart. Rather, they've been short on priests for the last decade or so, and this is Rome's way of filling the bill."

Maguire, who was once a priest on the faculty of a seminary in the '60s, said there used to be great concern if a candidate showed "a hint of gayness. If the guy was not sufficiently athletic, he could be booted." It was only when the bishops realized they would soon have no priests that they began admitting gays.

Maguire said a friend of his was recently being recruited by an order, and he explained to the order that he was gay and did not think he could make a commitment to celibacy. Maguire said the

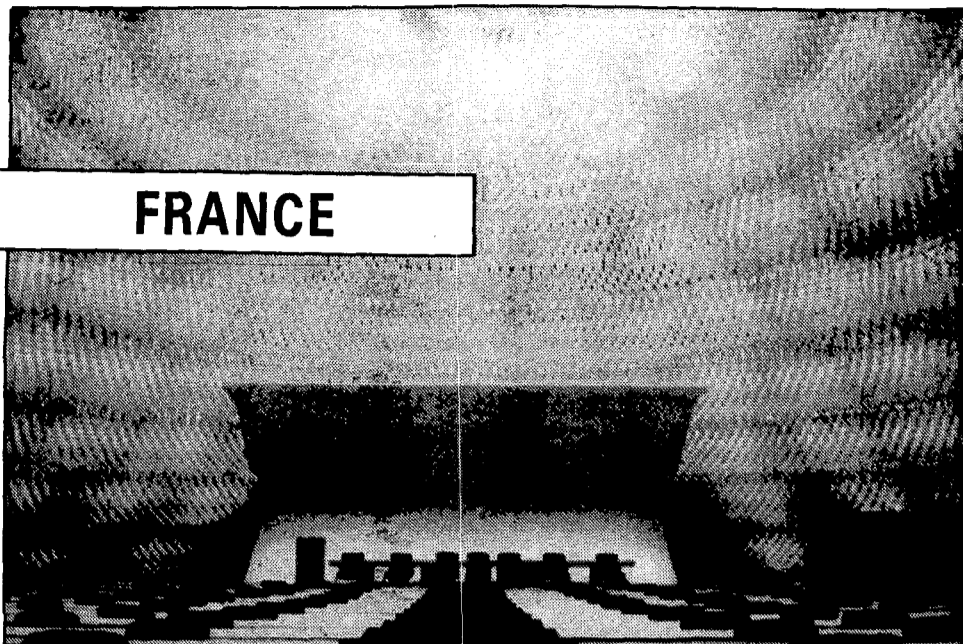
order responded to the man that celibacy meant "a commitment to the goals of the group." The man subsequently declined the invitation, saying that he was dismayed by the order's lack of integrity concerning its stated goals.

In Maguire's view, allowing gays in the priesthood also clarifies a certain rank ordering of those considered "misfits" by the Roman hierarchy. "The church will take gay men [as priests] before they'll take married men who are 'tainted' by women. Both of these groups will be preferable to women. This—and the fact that at bottom the hierarchy, like society, has a view of gay men being effeminate and therefore inferior—makes me think that at the bottom of most of this is more than a bit of mysogyny."

Maguire added that the best hope of the church would be for the hierarchy to declare a "20-year moratorium on pelvic issues."

—B.M.

## FRANCE



A house divided: the French Communist Party Central Committee meeting room in Paris.

## An ill French Communist Party may find remedy in 'renovation'

By Diana Johnstone

PARIS

**S**CENES OF THE WINTER OF 1987: ON A COLD day in January, a mobile "restaurant du coeur," or soup kitchen, was parked in the market square in Pont-à-Mousson, a steel town in the eastern French region of Lorraine. With more and more people out of work, there were plenty

of customers for the free food. But the town's right-wing mayor, Bernard Guy, ordered the unsightly thing towed away.

The dynamic young Communist mayor of the neighboring village of Blénod, Michel Bertelle, 39, took the matter to heart. Rushing to the scene, Bertelle angrily tried to stop the "heart restaurant" from being towed away. In vain. Still upset, Bertelle suddenly

fell dead of a massive coronary.

Bertelle was one of the most outspoken of the "renovators," as critics of the French Communist Party (PCF) leadership currently call themselves. After the PCF fell below 10 percent of the vote in elections last March, Bertelle addressed a letter to the PCF Central Committee demanding the immediate convocation of a special party congress to "update our party's orientations, practices and leadership."

Bertelle's death raised a delicate political problem. For his post as mayor of Blénod, he was succeeded by his deputy, another renovator. But a special election has to be held next month to fill his seat on the regional council in the Lorraine department of Meurthe-et-Moselle. The local party nominated Alain Amicabile, who in 1985 was excluded from the Central Committee for his renovating tendencies. The PCF leadership balked at endorsing the heretic, but did not dare run a rival candidate.

So in the March election, Alain Amicabile will be running as "the candidate of Communists" rather than as the candidate of the PCF. This is a first, which renovators see as significant for the future of their movement.

Unlike the challenges to PCF leadership in the late '70s, the "renovator" revolt is not mainly a matter of Paris intellectuals. Critical intellectuals have already left in droves, and the Paris region has long since been taken in hand. Most of the Communist Party's Paris region troublemakers are already outside the party, waiting to see what may happen to revive the sort of party they could want to work in.

**Provincial putsch:** The current revolt is brewing out in the provinces, among the party's own full-time militants, who see their party's very survival threatened by its leaders' stubborn persistence in error. Criticism is particularly strong in the regional federations around the cities of Limoges, Nancy, Montpellier, Toulouse and Brest, and in cer-

called for a "cultural revolution" in the party.

Marchais's failure was confirmed last March, when the PCF's nationwide score sank below 10 percent, compared to more than 20 percent in the '70s. In contrast, Rigout's Haute Vienne gave the PCF 20.9 percent.

The renovators wanted to call a congress immediately to analyze the reasons for the PCF's steady decline and change course. But Marchais was ready with the official explanation for the PCF's poor showing: it was a result of the "general drift rightward of the electorate," expressing a profound movement of society. This is the "major obstacle we shall continue to be up against," Marchais told a post-election meeting of the Central Committee last March 25.

Society is drifting fatally to the right, leaving the PCF like a rock exposed by the outgoing tide, petrified and unmoving. This grim vision is preached with special conviction by the editor in chief of the PCF daily *L'Humanité*, Roland Leroy.

But suddenly last December, thousands of students were out in the street forcing the conservative government to back down. Leading renovator Pierre Juquin was enthusiastic: "The idea that French society has drifted to the right is completely contradicted by reality," he observed. The student movement was followed by a wave of militant strikes. The PCF, bracing itself against "society's drift to the right," did not know how to relate to these unexpected events.

**Renovation or liquidation?** Pessimistic and defensive, the PCF has ceased to contribute to political debate in France. The sudden student and worker movements showed that "society" has not accepted the "drift to the right," the gospel of American competitive free enterprise as preached over the media. But what else is there? The demand for a political alternative implicit in the student and worker revolts emboldened the renovators to challenge their party's paralytic leadership.

Marchais hastened to put them down. In a TV interview on January 14, Georges Marchais said the "renovators" should really be called "liquidators," because they were out to liquidate the party.

This Stalinist language set off anger among the renovators and provided newspaper cartoonists with some obvious jokes about Marchais purging Gorbachov as a party "liquidator." Marcel Rigout wrote a vigorous protest.

On January 27, the Central Committee met in Paris and backed Marchais with a resolution accusing the renovators of aiming to "liquidate what is most essential in the Communist Party." Claude Poperen, a lifelong militant in the CGT labor union at the Renault factory in the Paris suburb of Billancourt, resigned from the Central Committee in protest. A short time later, Rigout sent word from the Limoges hospital where he was undergoing an eye operation that he too was resigning from the Central Committee.

**A hard blow:** Although both men stayed in the party, and Rigout remains in parliament, their resignations were a worse blow to the party's self-image as a party of the working class than protests from intellectuals. Poperen represents the PCF's labor base, Rigout its roots in rural radicalism.

One of the Central Committee's last re-

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