

# THE CATHOLIC CONSCIENCE

*Amid the church's crisis and calumny,  
Portland's queer parishioners  
put their faith in God before the Vatican*

by Timothy Krause • Photos by Marty Davis



*Editor's note: Individual names have been changed to preserve privacy.*

**D**uring the past year, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has been violently shaken by tremors of public lawsuits and the aftershocks of private doubts surrounding child sex abuse scandals.

As allegations of misconduct among priests accrued, a number of church officials and laity publicly associated these incidents of pedophilia with homosexuality. More recently, a draft policy circulated in October by the Congregation for Catholic Education sought to prevent gay men from becoming priests because the church regards homosexuality as "objectively disordered."

Father Abraham, a retired priest, community leader and gay man who lives with his partner in Northeast Portland, criticizes the actions of U.S. bishops in sweeping the real and long-time problem of pedophilia under the rug. He also points to a complex conspiracy of media frenzy, faulty extraction of suppressed memories and an opportunity to jump on a financial bandwagon as many ways actual incidents may have become distorted.

"Although my faith is not shaken," Father Abraham says, "it makes me extremely aware of

how much more careful I would have to be to never be alone with someone under any circumstances. Even if a young boy or a young girl came in having an extreme problem at home, I would still have to make sure that some outsider was there. I can't take the chance of being alone."

Sister Beatrice, a lesbian nun from Southwest Portland, agrees the church has not handled the situation well. The practice of offering forgiveness by saying "go and sin no more" and then shuffling perpetrators to a new location without treatment or disciplinary measures simply "poisoned the well" over and over again, creating a trail of mistrust.

Sister Beatrice recognizes that the institutional church exists in the same context as the rest of the world.

She notes how it's often about power within the hierarchy and the need for the organization to preserve itself that leads church officials in search of easy ways out of jeopardy. And since the majority of the alleged victims are boys, gay priests—and homosexuality in general—make easy targets for blame.

Esther, a Portland lesbian and soon-to-be sister, has little confidence in organizations to do the right thing when their status quo is threatened. An entity such as the Catholic Church "goes behind closed doors, turns out the lights and starts

fumbling around in the dark looking for some answer that will make the questions go away. The result is someone usually comes along, pries open the door, turns on a big old floodlight, and we find our leaders standing around with their pants down, so to speak."

As a result, Catholics have had to come to terms with not only the harboring of sex offenders among the ranks of the clergy but also church leaders who seek to scapegoat gay priests and denounce homosexuality in the process. The notion of saintly leaders suddenly revealing human flaws has led many parishioners to question—and sometimes abandon—their trust in the church's divine guidance. But many queer Catholics in Portland are choosing to look beyond the institution, letting their conscience rather than the Vatican guide their day-to-day faith.

*Just Out* recently invited comments from Father Abraham, Sister Beatrice, Esther and other queers among the more than 351,000 Catholics in Portland. Their thoughts coalesce into three significant points.

## 1. Do not confuse homosexuality with pedophilia

**T**he blaming of homosexuality in cases of pedophilia (or, in many instances, ephebophilia, for those attracted to teen-agers) is not limited to the Catholic hierarchy. A recent national poll published in *USA Today* claims 40 percent of Catholics assume a

homosexual connection in the incidents of child sexual abuse by priests.

Sister Beatrice attributes the confusion with homosexuality to misinformation. "It's a prejudice and a bias," she says, "and if we're looking for whom to blame, then it seems a natural conclusion to make, but it's only on

the basis of a combination of homophobia, misinformation and not knowing anybody who's gay."

When difficult and painful things happen, people become angry and scared, Esther remarks. "They jump to the first easy answer. It is certainly easier to look at something—such as a life of celibacy—not understand it and think that it must somehow be the cause or link. Or, look at someone who has a different sexual orientation and—again, out of ignorance—point the finger. When people believe in their heart that homosexuality is a perversion, they can easily link this perception to the perversion of pedophilia."

Queer-friendly St. Andrew parish in Northeast Portland held a forum last spring specifically to address the scandal. A formal letter was delivered to a June meeting of the American Council of Bishops expressing concern that "homosexuality and pedophilia need to be clearly distinguished from each other. And, it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that sexual abuse is always about power rather than about

sex. We feel that the clerical culture of secrecy contributes to the abuse of power which allows sexual abuse to happen."

Although the Catholic Church doesn't consider homosexuality itself

a sin, homosexual genital contact is considered sex outside of marriage and, thus, unacceptable. Because marriage is not an option for queer Catholics, how do parishioners—and the significant number of gay clergy, for that matter—reconcile their homosexuality with a belief system that seems to be so anti-gay?

**"When people believe in their heart that homosexuality is a perversion, they can easily link this perception to the perversion of pedophilia"**

—Esther

