

Steven P. Millies
Professor of Public Theology
Director, The Bernardin Center
Catholic Theological Union
5416 S. Cornell Ave.
Chicago, IL 60615

+1 773 371 5435 (direct) +1 773 371 5566 (fax) +1 803 979 5658 (mobile)
smillies@ctu.edu

WORD COUNT: 2342

AUTHOR BIO: Steven P. Millies is professor of public theology and director of The Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His most recent book is *Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters' Road from Roe to Trump* (Liturgical Press, 2018).

“The Church at The Pillar:
A Chilling Turn for a Polarized Church.”
FutureChurch TalkUp Tuesday Series
August 3, 2021

I have been writing about Catholicism in the mainstream, secular press for almost twenty years now, and at a point like the one where I find myself it could be easy to begin to think I've seen it all and there is nothing left that could surprise me. It is within that context that I say nothing in my past career or experience prepared me to be able to say to you today that the last two weeks or so have associated my name with Grindr in news reports on four continents.

I should say, I don't think that is funny because of Grindr or because of the circumstances in which the former general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic bishops has found himself. Rather, I find it funny because I am me. Being quite honest, I think of myself as a sort of a conservative fellow. Everything about me is straitlaced. My wife jokes that I am so square I have corners. My seventeen-year-old son asked over the weekend whether I sleep in khakis and a blue oxford shirt. Especially identifying as I do as a cis-white male nearing fifty years old, I am in one respect the portrait of how the Catholicism of a generation, or two, or three ago would imagine a Catholic intellectual to look. In that way, despite how new these issues are for me as a

scholar, it has been a pleasure to subvert those expectations my appearance might induce to be an ally for the LGBTQ+ community. If privilege is for anything, it is for this.

In another dimension, we should say that I am the director of The Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union and, in that way, some other assumptions might suggest themselves. Perhaps in that light I might seem like a sort of a church progressive, a proponent of the Second Vatican Council, a believer in the idea that the past is not a rulebook etched in stone to tell us how things must be forever.

But what I would say is that both can be true. My own view was that Cardinal Bernardin was a sort of conservative in his own way, in the way that any Catholic must be. To be Catholic is to believe that we cannot simply abandon the past. At the same time, holding tight to the past does not mean that the tradition cannot have a growing end. The tradition must grow, it must develop if it is alive. If the church knows everything already, then we are wasting a lot of time before the Eschaton. We are meant to learn and doctrine is meant to develop for as long as we are here. And, in an important way, that is the identity of the church. We are on a pilgrimage in history, learning from the tradition, from each other, and from the world around us as we slowly and sometimes painfully learn the mind of God. We come to see the plan for salvation in its fullness, a plan we cannot know yet.

But having located myself in that way, I think the necessary next thing to say is that we have entered into a fundamentally new place and new era with the revelations of The Pillar on July 20. The general shape of the divisions that I have just traced and, briefly in my own way, attempted to overcome, the division between a so-called right and a so-called left, has taken on a new character at least in the United States seemingly since Joe Biden won the White House last year. Something seems quietly to have snapped that was bending to the point of breaking since

Francis was elected pope. We seem finally to have reached the point where the conflict is in the open, undisguised, and unabashed.

Quite curiously too, quite a lot of the conflict seems to be focused on gay men in the priesthood—or, the suspicion of gay men in the priesthood. A quick browse of a website like Church Militant would tend to confirm this—a website I should say where Chicago’s late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin lives on almost daily. There is, as far as I can tell, nowhere else he is written about quite so much in 2021. Yet everything they write about a man dead now nearly twenty-five years is about the suggestion that he may have been gay, that he was a “homopredator,” that he was the leader of a gay cabal inside the church in league with Theodore McCarrick (a connection they make constantly and, as Bernardin’s biographer, I can affirm nothing in the record I’ve reviewed bears out).

It could be tempting to think that this emphasis began with 2005’s Vatican Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discerning of Vocations, which said that men with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” cannot be ordained. But the challenge runs much deeper. In his book Freeing Celibacy, Father Donald Cozzens reviewed the history of research that found “disproportionately high numbers of gay seminarians and priests”(65) going back to the 1970’s, and a growing fear among some that “the priesthood is or is becoming ‘a gay profession’”(65). The clergy sex abuse crisis of the last twenty years only has heightened the sense of worry about this in some circles. But I want to dwell with Cozzens for just a few moments before we return back to our main line of inquiry here, about how the divisions within the church now have brought us to a witch hunt for gay priests.

Cozzens goes on. He writes, “The charged feelings surrounding the issue of gay priests, bishops, and seminarians will only be dissipated when the reality of homosexuals in the ranks of

the clergy is dealt with openly, compassionately, and with wisdom. The major obstacle to such a response by church officials is the Vatican's insistence that same-sex attraction is objectively "disordered"(67). He then goes on to ask the key question—

Why...would a gay believer want to be a celibate priest? As officials of the church, priests are charged with the promulgation of church teaching and with presenting it in as compelling a manner as possible. Pastorally, they are to uphold this teaching even when it is challenged or rebuffed. Gay priests find themselves in a position where they are expected to teach clearly that homosexual orientation is intrinsically and objectively disordered. They may not feel that their own orientation is flawed, unnatural, sic or disordered, but they are expected to hold publicly that it is abnormal and disordered....So why might gay believers be drawn to the priesthood? Some acknowledge that the suspicion they were gay filled them with terror and even disgust. Aware of the church's teaching that a same-sex orientation is objectively disordered, the very celibacy of the priesthood was appealing. They believed they might be able to put their sexuality "on the shelf," so to speak. As celibates, they imagined—and hoped—there would be no need to deal with the issue....But coming to terms with ones [sexuality], whether straight or gay, is critical to the formation of a health and integrated personality. Attempts to put sexuality "on the shelf" or to deny or repress its energy and power prove, sooner or later, to backfire"(68-69).

There is more. Cozzens treats the issue comprehensively, and sensitively. But I think we can see the general outlines here of how Cozzens's analysis sheds some light on what has happened with The Pillar and where the church finds itself today.

A rather flawed theological apprehension of human sexuality has taken hold of how we think about priesthood. For that matter, it also concerns the larger question of how the church interacts with the whole world. The longstanding tendency of the church has been to idealize things—to idealize priests, to idealize sexual morality, to idealize the world’s relationship to our faith. We have tended to place the church and the Catholic way of doing things high on a pedestal, as though the world were too dirty and fallen for the church or Catholics to have much to do with it.

In a way, this opens the larger question. The fraught reception of the Second Vatican Council across the last six decades is centered on how unsettling it is for those who hold to an idealized vision of Catholicism to engage the modern world as it is, to accompany people where they are, to encounter the human race and all its flaws because this is the field of salvation that has been prepared for us. It can seem as though coming down off the cloud of our idealized vision of the church is a betrayal of core commitments we have as Catholics, whether they are about liturgy or ethical issues or sexual morality. No matter how much science abounds to tell us that women and men are created with what the church calls same-sex attraction, no matter how many times that we affirm there can be no conflict between our faith and what reason discloses to us, we cannot seem to make the leap especially in the realm of sexual morality—a leap that would assist not only gay priests but uncounted others to integrate their sexuality into their personalities in a far easier and healthier way as believing, practicing Catholics.

The neurotic apprehension about just that possibility is what has been exploited by The Pillar (as Church Militant has exploited it for far longer). The idea of gay cabals controlling the church holds some appeal for people who prefer that more idealized vision. And, so far as the question of private sexual behavior is interpreted to tell us something about a person’s faith, now

the availability of data tracking has made it possible to police people. For many, as for Church Militant and The Pillar, it appears to be a virtue to expose people to public scrutiny for private sexual behavior. That is, at least, the claim that they have made.

But we know something else, too. We know what happened with that unfortunate monsignor who was outed by The Pillar was only the beginning. Just days later The Pillar reported that they were in possession of data showing over 200 uses of Grindr at 10 properties owned by the Archdiocese of Newark. And, now the real meaning and importance of what has happened begins to come into view. No one is safe. The Pillar is watching. And, a new era has been entered where the divisions within the church now will be contested by way of an almost McCarthyite fervor to expose the homosexuals among us as though they were communists in much the same way that the House Un-American Activities Committee rooted out people who weren't 'really Americans.' As Joseph McCarthy claimed many times to hold in his hand a list bearing an always shifting number of names of communists working in the State Department, The Pillar now holds data affirming the presence of gay men working for the church.

And, the chilling effect is the point. Notice some things about that unfortunate monsignor I haven't named. We know, if The Pillar's reporting is correct, that Grindr may have been on his phone. His phone may have been at gay clubs. But while it may seem like I'm straining to defend him, I'm not. In fact, we don't know much about his conduct. We do not know about any actual thing that happened. We certainly do not even know that he is gay. But the message is clear to gay men who may be in the priesthood or working anywhere else in the church: You can be found out. You can be exposed. You can be outed. Your life can be ruined.

So be quiet.

Now, the debate within the church is one that can be joined safely only by straight people. All others risk exposure.

At least, until The Pillar or someone else mines the data and phone use relating to pornographic websites. Or Cayman Islands bank accounts. Or websites encouraging married people to have affairs. Or whatever.

And, that is the real problem here finally that concerns all of us. A climate of all-out war in the church has been coming for decades. What The Pillar has come to possess and to demonstrate it can use is the equivalent of a nuclear weapon. And, we have become the church that can destroy one another in the name of being right in our arguments about the future of the church.

My friend Mike Lewis, who runs a website Where Peter Is, made an observation shortly after The Pillar revelations that stuck with me. Journalists have known that this use of personal data available for purchase was coming at some point, it only was going to be a matter of time. But Mike wondered, what does it say about the Catholic Church that we of all people were the ones who brought the world to this new brink? If there were any doubt before, now there can be no denying we certainly must be among the most divisive social forces in the United States, if not the world.

And then there are the other questions, too. Questions about the future of the church itself. They are questions not only about sexual morality and becoming a church that is welcoming for LGBTQ+ persons. They are questions also about accepting the primacy of the bishop of Rome. They are questions about accepting the Second Vatican Council. They are questions about whether this church can prevail against the forces of human divisiveness and selfishness, even if it can prevail against the gates of hell.

A new future is here for this church—I say with some intention to an organization called FutureChurch. It has been coming for a long while. It is not a future I think we would have chosen. And, the question is what we all are going to do about it. In days and years to come, finding that answer will be important work for all of us.

Thank you.