

CATHOLIC TASTES

A new book claims that 80% of the clerics in the Vatican bureaucracy are gay and some have live-in boyfriends. What are we to make of the priestly vow of celibacy? **by KARL du FRESNE**

These are turbulent times in the Catholic Church.

This week, Australian cardinal George Pell was sentenced to six years' jail for sexually molesting two choirboys. The offending, which took place in the mid-1990s, included inducing one of them to perform oral sex, after he caught them drinking sacramental wine in the sacristy of Melbourne's Catholic cathedral (the verdict is being appealed).

In the same month as Pell was publicly disgraced, former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was Archbishop of Washington DC and a confidant of prominent politicians, was defrocked for the sexual abuse

of boys and seminarians (trainee priests) – a scandal that prompted Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the Vatican's former apostolic nuncio (papal ambassador) to the United States, to publish a damning letter accusing the Vatican of ignoring years of warnings about McCarrick's sexual conduct.

Meanwhile, in the Vatican, a doctrinal battle over homosexuality is raging between

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liberals, of whom the Pope is one, and a group of rebellious conservative cardinals.

Into the midst of this ecclesiastical turmoil, a gay French writer and sociologist has lobbed a hand grenade in the form of a sensational book alleging that homosexuality is rampant in the church, even at its highest levels, and that the culture of secrecy and hypocrisy surrounding it can be blamed for much of the scandal that has tainted Catholicism.

In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy, by Frédéric Martel, was

Culture of secrecy in the Catholic Church: Frédéric Martel; right, *St Sebastian* by Giovanni Domenico Cerrini.

published in February in eight languages and 20 countries. The author says he spent four years researching the book and discovered a secret world he describes as “50 shades of gay”.

The Vatican, according to Martel, is one of the world's biggest homosexual communities. He compares it with San Francisco's famously gay Castro District.

Martel claims to have been told by his sources that 80% of the clerics in the Curia, the Vatican bureaucracy, are “in the parish” – the Vatican code denoting homosexuality. That includes three out of every four cardinals.

What his sources told him was unsayable for a long time, Martel writes, but the resignation in 2013 of the conservative Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis' desire for reform, have “freed people's tongues” and encouraged them to break the code of omertà, or silence. He also suggests that ecclesiastical sex scandals and a more courageous press have led to a greater willingness to disclose the church's secrets.

From interviews with 1500 sources in 30 countries – including dozens of cardinals, bishops and apostolic nuncios – Martel builds a picture of an institution that presents a pious face to the world while turning a blind eye to sexual conduct that makes a mockery of the priestly vow of celibacy, to say nothing of the church's official position on homosexuality.

When you read the book, it's often hard to distinguish rumour, speculation and innuendo from hard facts. But Martel names so





many sources and provides so much detail that overall, *In the Closet* is persuasive. If it's made up, it's the most audacious con job in publishing since the *Hitler Diaries* of the 1980s.

Certainly the Catholic press, which might be expected to scrutinise the book intently for error, has generally taken it seriously. Although a critic in the American *National Catholic Reporter* dismissed it as full of salacious gossip and stereotypes, a review in the British Catholic weekly the *Tablet*, written by a former master of the Dominican Order of priests, concluded: "If only half of what he [Martel] claims is true, we are still faced with revelations that are stunning."

Significantly, no one appears to have seriously challenged Martel's central proposition that "secret homosexuals" are in the majority in the Vatican, where they wield power and influence.

THE SECRET SHAME

As a gay man, Martel is not out to condemn homosexuality. "Let it be clear that for me, a priest or a cardinal should not be ashamed about being homosexual," he writes.

Rather, his aim is to skewer the hypocrisy that he claims permeates the Vatican's teaching on homosexuality. In doing so, he clearly seeks to discredit the church's position that gay men are "intrinsically disordered" and that homosexual acts are sinful.

A central thesis in his book is that the climate of silence and secrecy around homosexuality in the church enabled sexual abuse to flourish. Martel doesn't equate homosexuality with child abuse, but he says fear of being exposed as gay was a crucial

factor that discouraged priests and bishops from reporting known abusers.

And he goes further, arguing that the secret shame of repressed homosexuality underpins all of Catholicism's hang-ups and prohibitions regarding sex.

He also claims that homosexuality paradoxically co-exists with virulent homophobia in the church, and more controversially that some of the most vehement conservative defenders of the church's teachings on homosexuality are themselves gay.

Conversely, he asserts that those in the

A central thesis in his book is that the climate of silence and secrecy around homosexuality in the church enabled sexual abuse to flourish.

Vatican who are not gay – including the Pope himself – tend to be relaxed about sexuality.

The book has stoked the flames of a doctrinal schism that has convulsed the church at its highest level. According to Martel, homosexuality lies at the heart of a bitter split between traditionalist clerics, who fear the Vatican is going soft on the issue, and a gay-friendly faction that includes Pope Francis.

That split, the first signs of which appeared soon after the election of Pope Francis in 2013, came out into the open in February when two high-profile conservative

cardinals wrote an emotionally charged open letter denouncing "the plague of the homosexual agenda" within the church, which they said was "promoted by organised networks and protected by a climate of complicity and a conspiracy of silence".

The letter, which was written after the agenda of a highly publicised Vatican summit on sexual abuse was altered to remove all references to homosexuality, was seen as a direct challenge to the Pope. According to Pope Francis and his allies, sexual abuse should be blamed not on homosexuality, but more loosely on abuse of power by a "clerical caste".

Ironically, although the letter seemed to confirm the central premise of Martel's book, one of the signatories – US cardinal Raymond Burke – is among those identified by Martel, although without verification, as a closet homosexual.

The Pope has alluded to church officials leading "hidden and often dissolute" lives. In a homily in 2016, which Martel interprets as a coded attack on conservative gay cardinals, Pope Francis – using typically opaque Vatican language – condemned what he called "rigidity". "Behind rigidity there is always something hidden, in many cases a double life, but there is also something like an illness," the Pope said. According to Martel, the equation of "rigidity" – for which read doctrinal conservatism – with a double life is a theme subsequently taken up by the Pope's supporters.

Prominent British Catholic journalist Damian Thompson, writing in the *Spectator*, has gone so far as to suggest that Martel's book should be seen as part of an ongoing battle for control of the church. Thompson argues that "Team Francis" co-operated with Martel because they wanted a hit job on the Pope's conservative enemies. The book "bears the fingerprints of the Pope's closest advisers", he says.

VATICAN POWER STRUGGLE

Open Martel's 555-page doorstop of a book on almost any page and you can expect to be confronted by claims that would shock faithful Catholics. They include the following assertions, in no particular order:

- Some officials in the Curia, including five cardinals in the powerful Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, have live-in boyfriends, often posing as assistants, valets or chauffeurs.
- According to Martel, gay prelates hit on seminarians and even members of the

GETTY IMAGES



Pope Francis: the ongoing battle for control of the Church.

Swiss Guard. The author hints that he was discreetly propositioned by some of the clerics he interviewed.

- Male prostitution flourishes in an area of Rome close to the Vatican, largely because of demand from priests seeking an outlet for “profound sexual frustration”.
- Influential American cardinal Francis Spellman, revered by Catholics during the Cold War era, was a “voracious homosexual”.
- Pope John Paul II, although a conservative, promoted gay clerics who supported his fervent anti-communist stance and his crackdown on liberation theology – the Latin-American Catholic movement that drew inspiration from Marxist theory. John Paul’s Colombian “enforcer”, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, is described in the book as an obsessive and corrupt homosexual, despite adopting an aggressively anti-gay stance in public.
- Pope Benedict abdicated in 2013 not just because of old age and fatigue, as officially stated, but also because he was overwhelmed by what he had learnt about the extent of sexual abuse by priests in Cuba during a visit to the Caribbean island the previous year.

Various high-ranking prelates are portrayed in the book as vain, obsequious, disrespectful to subordinates and prone to petty rivalries. Pope Francis emerges as something of a dilettante – erratic and often ambiguous in his public statements, but capable of Machiavellian and vindictive conduct in the Vatican power struggle.

Martel portrays the Vatican not only as a place of Byzantine intrigue, but also soaked in gay iconography and homoerotic

art, from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to the many paintings of the martyrdom of St Sebastian – one of which Martel describes as “so enticing and libidinous that it could be used on the cover of an encyclopaedia of LGBT cultures”.

The usual explanation for the prevalence of homosexuals in the church, as a thoughtful review of Martel’s book in the *Guardian* points out, is that for generations “the priesthood was almost the only career open to a homosexual youth in Europe or the US, and priestly celibacy offered a sancti-

Male prostitution flourishes in an area of Rome close to the Vatican, largely because of demand from priests seeking an outlet for “profound sexual frustration”.

fied escape from what would otherwise have been a crippling shame”.

Martel endorses this view and says one of the reasons for the decline in priestly vocations, which has reached crisis proportions in parts of the Western world, is that gay men now have other options. Homosexuality is generally accepted and they no longer face awkward questions about why they haven’t married or had children.

But he also argues that many homosexuals are attracted to the church by its traditions and liturgical trappings: the processions, the sacramental rituals, the robes

and vestments and the sacred music.

INSIDE THE SYSTEM

Speaking to the *Listener* from Paris, Martel – who was Catholic as a child but describes himself as no longer a believer – denies having been motivated by any anti-Catholic agenda.

He says the book (his 11th) began merely as an investigation after his curiosity was aroused by a priest who had read some of his previous work and approached him for advice about coming out publicly as gay. “I didn’t know Italy well and the Vatican not at all,” Martel says in heavily accented but fluent English.

Martel was sceptical at first about what his sources told him, “but then you begin to work and what you discover every day is more surprising, and then you decide there is a book [to be written]”.

He ended up spending one week every month in Rome while also interviewing clerics throughout Europe and the Americas. He explains that it was easier to meet cardinals on their home ground than in Rome. Besides, he wanted to find out if the Vatican was exceptional – “because it was a concentration of power and idiosyncratic” – or whether gays were prevalent in the church in other places, too.

“I went to Mexico, Chile and Spain and I discovered that the situation was everywhere the same, which means a lot of gay people – many more than I thought. It was the case everywhere in the world.” (He didn’t come to New Zealand, although he will be here in June to promote the book.)

Remarkably, doors were opened to him and he even stayed in the Vatican

Turbulent times:
from left, US
cardinal Raymond
Burke, Theodore
McCarrick,
George Pell.



apartments. "This is immersive journalism. You really are inside the system."

Even more remarkably, sources at all levels of the church hierarchy were willing to speak to him – some of them freely, others cautiously – despite knowing of his record as a gay activist and writer. "The gay priests were very open. The cardinals were not open at all."

It should be noted that two of the cardinals Martel interviewed now say he gained access to them under false pretences, although one of them, the liberal German Walter Kasper, has been known to backtrack when statements cause him embarrassment.

Much of what Martel was told was off the record, and he admits that many of the quotations in the book don't give much away. To use his own word, they are "banal".

Many of his sources spoke in a type of code and Martel says it was up to him to decipher it and aggregate what various people were telling him – not an approach likely to be endorsed by reputable journalism schools. "I never changed a quotation, but I wrote a lot of things around the quotation," he says.

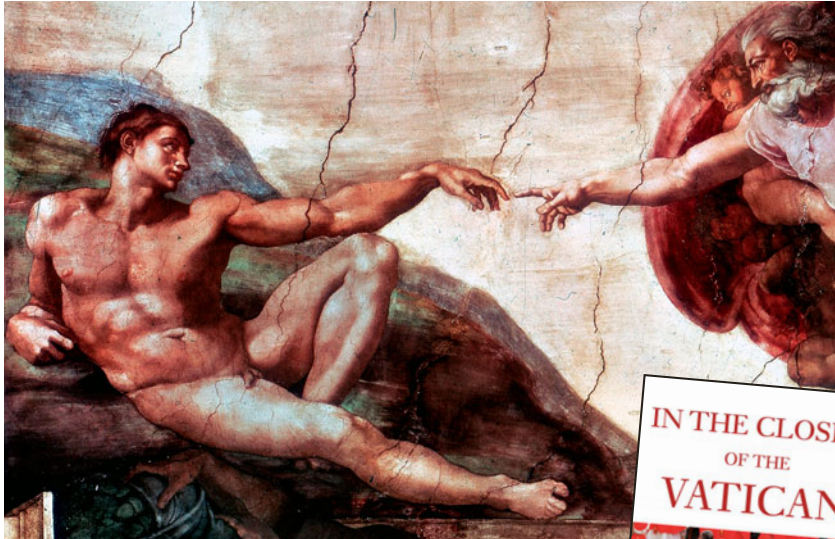
A HARMLESS FRENCHMAN

Why were his sources so obliging? "It's not possible to generalise. Every case is different."

He says there are gay priests who want to change the church's teaching on homosexuality. "They want the story to be out, so they tell you everything. They set up meetings. They find a way for you to meet cardinals and so on. Basically, they trust me; they have read my previous books and know I am not going to betray them and will keep off the record what they say.

"Then you have old people without anything to do. They are lonely; no one comes to see them." Some of the cardinals described in the book are in their eighties and live in isolated splendour within the Vatican.

"One of the reasons they spoke to me is that I didn't look dangerous, because I am French. It's as simple as that. If I was



Homeroptic art: Martel says the Vatican is filled with gay iconography, including Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Italian, they would have been much more careful because they know there are a lot of Italian journalists who try to penetrate their world. But I was French, and I was using the gay network, the French network and the Spanish-speaking network. I was from outside.

"One of the reasons they spoke to me is that I didn't look dangerous, because I am French. It's as simple as that. If I was Italian, they would have been much more careful."

"And then there are people who try to control you – who know what you are doing can be problematic, so they prefer to speak to you. There were other people who were naive and didn't understand what I was doing. I would see them five or six times and I would talk about homosexual activity and they didn't get it."

Often the meetings would take place over long lunches and dinners in cafes and restaurants. "I am French," he says. "A good meeting is a lunch. I always take two hours for lunch every day. That is a style of life for a French guy like me.

"It also explains the way I do the book – I create relationships, friendships, with these people. When you meet someone, typically

a bishop, he knows I am a gay journalist and he is extremely cautious. He doesn't say anything. He's trying to decide if I'm dangerous or not.

"I'm always very friendly and sympathetic; I try to create a relationship. He sees that I am trustworthy. I follow up with a text message; my way of doing research is to come back [for a further meeting]. They begin to trust me. Even today, after the book has come out, the majority [of sources] say it's okay."

Martel says he was helped by a core of reliable informants, both priests and lay people, embedded in the Vatican. "They have been there 20 or 30 years. They have slept with cardinals and bishops. So, when I go to meet a cardinal, I already have a lot of information about him."

He also had a team of assistants, researchers and translators. "Everywhere I went there were people preparing the ground – making contacts, arranging meetings. So, when I arrived, I already knew what I wanted and was able to connect with people."

Was it his aim that, by exposing the hypocrisy of the church, he would force it to change its position on homosexuality?

"You know, to be honest, of course I am openly gay and I hope the church will change, but it would be very pretentious to say that.

"The book may have that effect in the long run, but that is not really what I was expecting. Basically, I am a researcher and a journalist. My goal is just to do a good book, a book that changes the conversation, and I think that is already the case.

"But changing the church is not my problem. I mean, I'm not Catholic; I don't mind. My goal is not to change the church; that is the job of the Catholics themselves." ■

IN THE CLOSET OF THE VATICAN: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy, by Frédéric Martel (Bloomsbury, \$34.99).