

The Catholic clergy who like to prey

This exposé depicts the Church as a haven for gay men terrified of their sexuality, says Diarmaid MacCulloch

In the Closet of the Vatican
Power: Homosexuality, Hypocrisy
by *Frédéric Martel*
Bloomsbury,
555pp, £25

Rent boys who value priests as the ideal clientele; cardinals with a penchant for S&M; archbishops spending millions of the faithful's money campaigning against gay marriage while conducting discreet same-sex affairs or even decade-long cohabitations; sully glances below the flurry of male nudes on the Sistine Chapel ceiling: Frédéric Martel's book is heady stuff.

Some will find *In the Closet of the Vatican* a shocking challenge to their faith. Some will be gratified to be fed such relentless fuel for their kneejerk anti-Catholic prejudices. Others who know something of this multicoloured world around the Curia, the papal government in Rome, will read with a depression born of familiarity, tawling 550 pages of dismally plausible material with increasing weariness.

The Vatican is at the extreme end of a Roman Catholic clerical system that, from the earliest preparation of boys for a possible priestly career, is structurally geared to producing a clergy immature in sexual and emotional outlook, and homosexual by inclination. This is so marked at senior levels of the clerical hierarchy that Martel estimates about 80 per cent of the Vatican's clerical community to be gay. Even if that's pushing it, a clear finding is that the more noisy and vicious the anti-gay views of a particular senior cleric, the more likely he is to be a sexually active gay man, leading a double life full of secrets.

The apparently celibate claustrophobically single-sex world of the clergy is a



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BEYOND BELIEF
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haven for gay men terrified of their sexuality, a ready-made alibi with the bonus of traditional prestige. By contrast, celibacy for clergy has been a deterrent for heterosexuals. From the 1970s thousands of heterosexual priests left to get married, bitterly disappointed by the betrayal of the reform programme of the Second Vatican Council. Ironically, it is the remaining heterosexual minority among the leading clergy who have proved most sympathetic to gay people living out their lives in the modern world.

Knowing one or two bit players in Martel's cast of informants, I can testify that they are not fantasists or enemies of Catholicism, and they stand amid a legion of witnesses, from about 1,500 face-to-face interviews undertaken by Martel over four years across 30 countries. The book may read as sensationalist journalism, but it's also a remarkable feat of investigation, published in seven languages alongside the French original. French high style does not travel well into English and would lend a tone of camp hysteria to a treatise on stamp collecting. In the present volume, it's a bit much, and the translation doesn't always get the French right.

One big grouse: in a book crammed with tangled encounters across a 50-year canvas, it's criminal not to provide an index, to tell you Ricard from your Ruini or your Jauran from your Tomko. Nevertheless, beyond the flaws is a consistent argument.

Martel concentrates his case on the period of Pope Paul VI (1963-78) to the present Pope Francis, and shows what a negative effect the middle two, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, had on the Church and culture and amid much criticism, has a rueful affection for Benedict, but he shows how an increasingly hysterical homophobia dominated their pronouncements on sex. Around them luxuriated a hierarchy of gay-hating gay men, some of whom were enthusiastic in cosying up to murderous dictators, as long as the dictators were anti-communist (Cuba is a special, and interesting, counter-example); John Paul II's virulent if understandable hatred of communism blinded him to the grim facts about some of those he esteemed. The sins of his much-favoured Mexican cleric Cardinal Maciel, the founder of the militantly proselytising Legion of Christ, turned out to range from paedophilia to adult sexual

Wet side

its supper. "This is the pond as nature's meat platter," he says. The moonhen that lives on his pond starts off with five chicks; only one makes it to independence, despite their clever way of hiding from predators. He describes how a chick submerges itself: "It absolutely does not dive; it sinks like a lead brick." Moonhens can be nine-tenths submerged, which earned them the old country name of "dip-chick". Despite "outsized lily-pod feet", they can climb trees.

It's not all sex and violence. Sometimes nature just makes you go: "Cor, blimey." Some dragonflies can reach speeds in excess of 30mph; their eyes contain 30,000 facets so that they can see pretty much everywhere at once. They can also see colours we cannot imagine: humans are

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trichromatic, seeing colours as a combination of red, blue and green, thanks to three types of light-sensitive proteins called opsins; dragonflies have no fewer than 11 opsins. We also learn that those little surface-skating insects, backswimmers, hold air bubbles on their chest — "nature's version of oxygen cylinders" — so they can dive.

Lewis-Stempel is a superb observer; he is also lucky, or perhaps spends a lot of time wandering outdoors. He chances across a fox taking a late swim. He watches the resident heron "happily stabbing the toads. Through binoculars, I see he knifes them in the nape of the neck." Herons eat voles or mice; to swallow them more easily it dips them in the water to make them slippery. Nature is cunning. At one point the author puts his feet into a pond and describes "a writhing black torpedo [that] appears in seconds, then latches on to my flesh" — apparently



THREE'S COMPANY Male toads are vigorous but undiscriminating breeders

at the practice's Victorian zenith, 42 million leeches a year were used for phlebotomy (bloodletting).

He also has an original turn of phrase, colourful, but not overwrought. He talks of the "Dalek din of croaking frogs"; a startled heron taking off "cranks into the air, on wings raised by pulleys"; frogs "squat on stones, like third splats". A dull February sky is "the weird white of boiled fish eye". When his labrador, Bluebird, leaps into a pool in western France to chase a coypu, the dog becomes "a canine destroyer seeking a U-boat", the rodent which can stay underwater for 20 minutes, dives and hides in the darkness beneath.

Lewis-Stempel has twice won the Wainwright prize for nature writing — once for *Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, the Great War* and before that for *Meadowland: The Private Life of an English Field*. He has a schtick that works. His new

book, like *Meadowland* and his recent *The Wood: The Life and Times of Cockshutt Wood*, follows a small corner of his land over the changing seasons. He also sprinkles his text liberally with poetry (John Clare, Edward Thomas), folklore (suffering from gout? Swallow a live tadpole) and history (one of the last recorded cases of Leominster nag called Sarah Leeke in 1817). In *Still Water* he also devotes a chapter to practical advice about making a pond in your garden.

If you are new to the joys of Lewis-Stempel, though, I would suggest starting with *Meadowland* or *The Wood*, pondlife, though there are 470,000 ponds in the British countryside, is a slighter, less evocative subject. Thomas had less to wax lyrical about; bullrush is no substitute for mighty oaks. Still, by the end, the author has shown with some flair that "in the pond there are wondrous, multitudinous life forms. And curious cruelties."