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

VATICAN IN THE CLOSET HOMOSEXUALITY,
HYPOCRUSY

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

Bloomsbury, 555pp; £25

ent 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 samesex affairs or even decade-long cohabitations; sultry 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 graitified 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, trawling 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



BEYOND BELLEF
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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 is criminal not to provide an index, to tell your Ricard from your Ruini or your Tauran 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 gay people. He does not indulge in caricature 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 IIs 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 Marcial Maciel, the founder of the militantly proselytising Legion of Christ, turned out to range from paedophilia to adult sexual

Benedict to bring down that gross chancer. The vileness of Maciel is one of the most extreme examples of consequences from a blanket ban on any sexual expression outside heterosexual marriage. Make a decision to disobey the ban and you swim adrift in a world without rules. Moreover, it becomes easy to ignore any distinction between two different things: paedophilia and same-sex love between adults.

Throughout the book, incidental consolations appear. It would take a heart of stone not to laugh at Cardinal Raymond Burke, with his penchant for obsolete ecclesiastical regalia, especially the mighty cappa magna, a mantle for cardinals, glowing in scarlet and many metres long, necessitating a plethora of young men to keep the train in order in procession—cappa magnatasticl Yet even then, in the darker background, are Burke's links to such farright gurus as Sleve Bannon.

Any friend of the Roman Catholic Church needs to take this book's message seriously, events since its publication simply continuing the saga—the defrocking of the paedophile Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and the sentencing in Australia of Pope Francis's finance expert Cardinal George Pell. All institutions with charismatic leadership offer built-in temptations to people seeking to exploit the weak, and sexual exploitation is the perfect expression of power: so the USSouthern Baptists, superficially a very different branch of Christianity, are also struggling with a sexual dimposition of celibacy on all clergy, turning an honourable voluntary calling to celibacy into an inappropriately universal demand. No other church in Christendom has made that mistake, for which the Vatican has paid a heavy price. The present Pope, who is struggling as best he can against the world described in this book, is sued an apostolic exhortation entitled Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love). The traged of the Vatican described here is how little joy is visible, and how much love is tainted with fear, misrey and falsehood. Sir Domas of the particular of the church at Oxford U

Martel cent of the estimates Vatican's

to be gay community clerical about 80 per

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 II 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

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 turd 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

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 ducking scolds in the village pond was a 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 cruelities."

wet side

its supper. "This is the pond as nature's meat platter," he says. The moorhen 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." Moorhens can lie nine-tenths submerged, which earned them the old country name of "dip-chick." Despite "outsize lilypad 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

THREE'S COMPANY Male toads are vigorous but undiscriminating breeders