

Vatican would bar gays from seminaries: Critics say celibacy makes homosexuality a nonissue

by [Stacy Meichtry](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

New rules that would bar gays from the Roman Catholic priesthood have been submitted to Pope Benedict XVI for approval, signaling a push for tightened regulations as the church prepares to review the sexual conduct of its seminarians.

Prepared by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, which has oversight of seminaries, the guidelines are based on a longstanding church teaching that terms homosexuality an "objectively disordered" condition that could impair priests in performing their ministry.

Critics of the move say homosexuality should be a nonissue since all priests—gay or straight—are called to celibacy. They accuse the church of using gay men as a scapegoat for the church's sexual abuse scandal.

A Vatican official, speaking to Religion News Service on condition of anonymity because Vatican policy prohibits public discussion of internal matters, confirmed that a document containing the new regulations had been submitted to the pope for approval. However, he stressed that the paper could still be returned to the oversight body for revision. If that happened, its publication could still be years away.

A report in the September 22 *New York Times* quoted an unnamed "church official" as saying that the document's release was imminent and that it was not a question of "if it will be published, but when."

The conservative Catholic World News reported earlier that the pope had already approved the guidelines in the form of an "instruction" signed by the congregation's top two officials, Poland's Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski and Archbishop Michael Miller, an American.

The official who spoke to RNS called the CWN report “fabricated,” describing it as an effort to pressure the Vatican to release the long-awaited document.

If issued, the worldwide guidelines would be the church’s most definitive teaching on homosexuality in the priesthood and would apply to all Catholic seminaries. Work on the document began at the request of the late Pope John Paul II amid allegations that gay seminarians were struggling to maintain their vow of celibacy in exclusively male environments.

Anticipation of the document’s release comes as the Vatican prepares to launch a nationwide investigation of 229 U.S. seminaries. Referred to as an “apostolic visitation,” the probe was requested by American bishops in 2002 out of concern that inadequate seminary training was partly to blame for the child sex-abuse crisis.

A 12-page working paper, or “Instrumentum Laboris,” prepared for the investigation directs investigators to review behavior inside the seminaries related to alcohol, Internet and television use as well as “evidence of homosexuality” and “particular friendships” among seminarians.

Both the U.S. investigation and the worldwide guidelines reflect church teaching that has been in place for decades but seldom enforced. In 1961, the Sacred Congregation for Religious, a Vatican department in charge of religious orders, recommended that “those affected by the perverse inclination to homosexuality or pederasty should be excluded from religious vows and ordination.”

As recently as December 2002, the Congregation for Divine Worship and Sacraments weighed in on the issue. Responding to a query from an unidentified bishop, then-prefect Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez called the ordination of gay men “very risky.”

“A homosexual person or someone with homosexual tendencies is not, therefore, suitable to receive the sacrament of holy orders,” Estévez wrote in a letter published in the body’s main publication, *Notitiae*.

Despite these teachings, many seminaries have adopted “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies in recent years, prompting calls from conservative Catholic leaders for more restrictive measures.

Observers note that the severity of the ban will hinge on how far the document goes in defining homosexuality, and whether chaste priests who admit to having homosexual impulses—but not actions—would be tolerated.

Given the volatility of the issue, some have wondered if the pope will actually sign the document or simply let the guidelines be issued by the Congregation for Education without his official endorsement. If Benedict personally signed off on the guidelines—an endorsement known as “in forma specifica”—it would make the document’s teaching more difficult to reverse.

Under the proposed rules, gay men who have already been ordained would presumably be allowed to continue working as priests. Gay Catholic groups, however, fear that church leaders are intent on routing all gay men from the priesthood.

Francis DeBernardo, executive director of the Maryland-based New Ways Ministry, which works with gay Catholics, said the church should instead remove bishops whose “cowardice, secrecy and dishonesty” sheltered abusive priests. “Leaders with these moral faults do much more damage to the church than gay priests ever could,” DeBernardo said.