

Hypocrisy and the Vatican

An explosive book will be published next week claiming to expose the double lives of priests and cardinals and the deceit of the Church's condemnations of homosexuality. A former Master of the Dominicans wonders if this crisis could be experienced as a moment of grace.

By TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

ON 21 FEBRUARY, the opening day of the Vatican summit on sexual abuse, Frédéric Martel's *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy* will be published simultaneously in eight languages and twenty countries. This is an unfortunate coincidence since the issues are distinct though not completely unrelated.

As Martel interviewed me for over four hours, I was filled with increasing dismay and astonishment as he told me of the extremely high level of practising gays within the Vatican. Martel is "a Catholic atheist" but his book is not an angry exposé. He does not wish to out anyone. He clearly likes many of the Vatican officials he has met, but he wants to shine a spotlight on the hypocrisy of an organisation which condemns the practise of homosexuality while engaging in it, he asserts, on a massive scale. One of his hypotheses is that the more homophobic the prelate's declarations, the more likely he is to be gay.

I would love to be able to dismiss Martel's book as mere gossip. It will anger and sadden vast numbers of Catholics. For many this may be the last straw and they will be off. But it would be a mistake to rubbish this book. It is based on years of research during which Martel interviewed 41 cardinals, 52 bishops and monsignori and 45 nuncios and foreign ambassadors, as well as thousands of others. Never has so much pasta been consumed in the name of research. He seems to me to be a highly intelligent and honest journalist and the Church will need courage to respond to his revelations fruitfully.

But his perception of people is so dominated by the question of their sexual orientation that he sees evidence of it everywhere. He has a fascinating chapter on Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher and theologian, who lived intense and chaste friendships with several Catholic gay intellectuals. "I have gradually discovered the importance of this codex, this complex and secret password, a real key to reading *In the Closet*."

I do have some reservations. There are too many unattributed assertions: "It is estimated ..."; "It is claimed that ...", "a cardinal told me ..." and so on. I do not believe that Martel makes up these claims. A cardinal surely did say something to him, but I question whether in the gossipy world of the Vatican all these claims are to be taken at face value. There are too many innuendos and insinuations. Of course he cannot reveal his sources, but how reliable are they? Martel brilliantly decodes his meetings with Vatican prelates. He is attentive to their clothes, how their rooms are decorated, what their secretaries are like. His interpretations

Should priests go public about their own sexual orientation? I have my doubts about that his sexuality as an inspiration for many who are struggling with their own. But Rowan Williams has written a distinguished book on Maritain. Must we see Rowan

differently now? The paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Caravaggio are another code, all homosexuals! But the Queen has the largest collection of Leonardo da Vinci drawings in Britain. What are we to make of that?

Finally, Martel believes that it is only very rarely that a priest who is at ease in his sexuality could be happily celibate. We are doomed either to be practising or asexual or frustrated. I do not believe this. When I was Master of the Dominicans I met virtually every one of my brethren from more than a hundred countries for extended conversations. I have given retreats to diocesan priests in more than twenty countries, and heard thousands of their confessions. Growing into a mature and happy celibacy is a long and difficult process, often with failures on the way, but the great majority of priests with whom I talked seemed happy in their vocation and to live it honestly. I met many Vatican officials whose only closet was for keeping brooms in. Nevertheless, the need for discussion of married priests will become even more urgent.

So Martel and I have rather different assessments of the extent of the crisis. Am I too naïve? Does he let himself be carried away by gossip sometimes? Probably both. But if only half of what he claims is true, we are still faced with revelations that are stunning. How should the Church react?

The Church is living through a profound crisis because of sexual abuse. That is not the topic of Martel's book – he does not claim that these members of the Vatican are abusers, or that homosexuals are any more likely to abuse than heterosexuals. But his revelations will intensify the feeling that the Church is a corrupt institution that has lost all authority. We must face this with hope and courage.

THE STORY OF ISRAEL and the Church is of one crisis after another. With God's grace, these are fruitful. The crisis of the sixth-century BC Babylonian exile led Israel from a belief that their God was the greatest of the gods to true monotheism. The persecution of the new-born Jerusalem Church after Pentecost launched it on its worldwide mission. When Jesus did not return in glory after the Ascension, the crisis arguably led to the writing of the gospels. The greatest crisis of all was Jesus' passion and death which he embraced at the Last Supper, giving us his body and the new covenant in his blood. So we should not be afraid of crises.

How might today's crisis be lived through as a moment of grace? It is often said that the Church is experiencing the worst crisis since the Reformation. It is the crisis of the Post Reformation Church, the Church of the Council of Trent. Clericalism long predated the Reformation, beginning in the thirteenth century, but the response to the Reformation led to the development of highly trained clergy, with new seminaries and a new spirituality.

It was enormously successful. Without this new professional body of priests, typified by the Society of Jesus, the Church would not have survived so well in Europe. But, like every model of the Church, it had weaknesses, above all the development of a narrow caste that felt itself to be superior to the laity and unaccountable to anyone. This model of the Church, so necessary for its survival at one moment in its history, is now in crisis. Different factors, such as the sexual revolution of the Sixties, have brought its inherent

weaknesses to the fore. The clericalism that Pope Francis so detests risks fostering just the sort of hypocrisy that Martel reveals.

SO OUR REACTION to this present crisis should not be to batten down the hatches and hope that everything will go on as before. The only realistic response is bravely to explore new ways of being Church, already envisaged at the Second Vatican Council, less clerical, and in which the whole People of God have a voice. Clericalism means that the important conversations are between clerics. Already at Trent there had been a demand for the Church to revivify synodal government, whether at the universal or local level.

How should synods work? Who should have voice? How should decisions be taken? Are they instruments of consultation or of government? How can women have a strong voice in the Church? One fruit of the present crisis may be that we are being propelled unavoidably into imagining a new way of being Church. Anything less is just rearranging the furniture.

Pope Francis emerges as the hero of Martel's book. He understands exactly what is going on and is doing all that he can to change the culture of this secretive gay closet. I used to think that the Pope was overly harsh in his annual address to the Roman Curia. But if half of what Martel asserts is true, he was only speaking the truth when in 2014 he accused many of suffering from "the disease of existential schizophrenia ... In this way they create their own parallel world, where they set aside all that they teach with severity to others and begin to live a hidden and often dissolute life". So we should give thanks to God that we have a pope who has courage to confront the situation with integrity, and give him all of our support.

MARTEL ALSO HAS a certain affection for Pope Benedict, whom he sees as a tortured man. He believes that it was the revelation of the corruption of the clergy in Cuba that so disheartened Benedict that he bravely decided to resign. Benedict's fundamental honesty made him revolted by a corruption of which he slowly became aware but knew that it was beyond his strength to tackle. I would, though, disagree with his assessment of the then Cardinal Ratzinger's rule of the CDF. I found him more moderate and open to argument than this book suggests.

Finally, Martel exposes a dishonesty at the heart of the Church, in which senior clerics sound off with homophobic denunciations while they themselves, he asserts, are "practising". Martel attacks this mendacity. His revelations cannot be credibly used by conservative critics of Pope Francis, since the most homophobic critics of the Pope are under the spotlight in this book.

How can the Church become more truthful on issues of sexuality? Should priests go public about their own sexual orientation? I have my doubts about that. If a priest speaks openly about being straight or gay, unless there is overriding need, this might make it harder for him to be pastorally available for everyone. I have never felt, with the thousands of priests that I have met, that their sexuality is of any interest or importance. Yet there is an imbalance. A straight priest may happily make references to previous girlfriends but I cannot imagine a gay priest doing anything similar. So we need to reflect on what a new culture of honesty would entail. It is not obvious.

It must begin in our seminaries and houses of formation of religious. Candidates must be able to speak freely to those responsible for formation about who they are, and what their lives have been, without the threat of expulsion, otherwise the culture of cover-up will continue. Those in charge of formation must dare to be honest about themselves too. If seminarians are taught to cover up their sexuality, to live by nods and winks, an atmosphere is created in which the cover-up of other things, such as sexual abuse, is harder to resist.

Pope Francis faces determined opposition within the Vatican and yet a surprising number of its members were eager to talk to Martel. They knew who he was. The recorder was plainly visible. And yet they were happy to spill the beans. Many people in the Vatican appear to be ready for a new honesty. This bodes well for a new culture of truthfulness. As the Pope is alleged to have said on the evening of his election, "The carnival is over."

IN HIS ANNUAL address to the Roman Curia last December, Pope Francis said: "I myself would like to give heartfelt thanks to those media professionals who were honest and objective and sought to unmask these predators and to make their victims' voices heard." The issue of this book is hypocrisy, not abuse, but despite my reservations about his book, we should be grateful to Martel. However painful this moment, it can be lived with faith in the Lord who never deserts the Church, and so neither should we. A new way of being Church is emerging, which will have new strengths and weaknesses and which will in its turn one day be superseded.

Timothy Radcliffe OP is internationally renowned for his explorations of theology and contemporary society. He was Master of the Dominican order from 1992 to 2001. He now lives with the Dominican community at Blackfriars, Oxford.