

COLLANA A CURA DI ANTONIO SCURATI



MARCO MARZANO

LA CASTA DEI CASTI

I PRETI, IL SESSO E L'AMORE



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THE CHASTES' CASTE

translated from the Italian
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HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE SEMINARY: PAIN, DENIAL, AND CYNICISM

Homosexual activity in seminaries occupies an intermediary position between the universality of masturbation and the impossibility of relationships with women. In other words, if masturbation is commonplace and relationships with women incredibly rare, homosexuality is less widespread than masturbation but more so than heterosexual relationships.

I am certain that many actively gay seminarians, as is the case with Carlo (the protagonist of the story I told at the beginning of the third chapter), view the sex they practice with a sense of guilt and shame. I am equally aware that there is no shortage of homosexual theology students that are “cynical”, those who, as we will see, from the outset do not appear constrained by excessive moral scruples. Francesco Lepore, the gay ex-priest, even stated in his interview with Frédéric

Martel that “[the fact] an enormous majority of seminarians are young, gay men is a proven fact: the seminarians experience their own homosexuality in fairly normal way and, discreetly, go to gay bars without too many issues”. According to Lepore, then, the number of “cynics” and “opportunists” has increased over recent generations, as (significantly) has the seminarians’ habit of visiting gay bars. The availability of smartphones, social networks and chatrooms in today’s world have greatly facilitated the possibility of living double, triple, even quadruple lives. Despite this, I am still somewhat unconvinced of the universal validity of Lepore’s affirmations and how they apply to the entire country. Firstly, because greater social acceptance of homosexuality means gay men can embrace their sexuality and love openly and with much less apprehension than in the past. Why on earth would they become priests, creating a systematic and risky double life? Why would they choose lies and concealment when their sexual orientation is, for the most part, no longer a source of marginalisation, social isolation and professional discrimination in society? It is, in my opinion, still very possible that those choosing the priesthood are, in the vast majority, young homosexual men who “have not accepted themselves”, those who experience their preference for the same

sex with discomfort, guilt and denial. Secondly, it is true that the opportunities for easily finding romantic homosexual encounters have increased enormously compared to the past, thanks above all to social networks, apps and bars. It is, however, equally irrefutable that the freedom of movement enjoyed by seminarians remains fairly restricted. These young men leave the seminary on average once a week to visit their family or diocese. The opportunities for them to visit bars and meet people is, therefore, fairly limited. There is a temptation, given the above-mentioned reasons, to limit the reach of Lepore's words and the proliferation of "cynics" to those areas of the country, essentially rural areas and particularly those in the South, where the legitimacy of homosexuality is less recognised and where the likelihood of finding a dignified, well-paid job falls well below the average. These are also areas in which there is a distinct lack of gay bars and meeting places. Ultimately, I believe that Lepore's statement applies mostly to Rome, a city in which there is neither a lack of gay bars, nor seminarians from rural areas who are living far from home. I believe that even more valid is that which Drewermann wrote half a century ago: "One thing is certain: the clerics of the Catholic Church were, at least at the beginning, most likely never lacking in good will and commitment. The fact

that the ontological uncertainty of their existence leads them to see their true value in the choice of a clerical state, the true confirmation of their essence and a decisive recognition of who they are, means that the clerics desperately try to do absolutely everything that is asked of them.”

In any case, I will begin my excursus with the kind of human being who is the opposite of the cynic: the “problematic” gays, the ones (not lacking among seminarians) who are unsure of, or who find it very difficult to accept, the sexual orientation they fear is their own. It is for this reason that the problematic gays are able to remain entirely celibate, even once they enter the seminary, without any great suffering. This theory of mine is confirmed by Father Arthur, one of the gay priests contacted by Tricou (2019, p.9), who declared to the sociologist that interviewed him, that: “In fact, the more the homophobic the church was, the more it attracted homosexuals who were in denial, at least at the beginning of their career.”

For example, when Father Giuliano was at elementary school and the teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he answered without thinking too much about it: “a priest, miss”. “I was always attracted by the sacred and the spiritual, fascinated by silence and interested in meditation” he told me. “I was a

sensitive, affectionate child. I entered the seminary at fourteen years old, after a vocational encounter that was incredibly powerful for me at the time. Already as a boy of seven or eight, I knew I was attracted to men. I was aware of the fact that women held very little interest for me. And yet, for many years I focussed so completely on preparing for the priesthood, on my spiritual education, that I cancelled out even the desire for a relationship. I limited myself to practicing solitary sex with an immense sense of guilt. At a certain point, however, erotic fantasies began to grow along with my attraction to my companions. I spoke about it with the spiritual director, who told me not to worry, that it was normal, that I was by no means the only one in that difficult situation. He reassured me much like a father would, he didn't judge me, nor did he threaten to throw me out of the seminary. But nor he did help me deal with the problem in any way. Nor did I receive help from any of the others with whom I shared my problem, starting with the rector. Sex was an absolute taboo in the seminary. Homosexuality was in no way a problem as long as it wasn't discussed, as long as you didn't attempt to discuss it, and that there were no imprudent actions, like the one I will tell you about in a moment. In the meantime, my fantasies grew and at a certain point I fell head over heels in love with one

of my companions, a heterosexual man who later left the seminary. His leaving was heart-breaking for me, I suffered terribly. At that point, however, I wanted to understand, and I asked to see a psychologist. They told me that wasn't possible, that I would have to make do with the spiritual guidance, that there was no need for me to contact a therapist. So, I began to look around, to educate myself on it all, unbeknownst to my superiors. I procured books that I would read secretly in my room at night. The event that triggered it all was the sudden departure of a companion. He vanished from the seminary from one day to the next. The superiors called us in a few days later to inform us. They found absurd, convoluted ways of telling us, without ever mentioning the most pertinent word: homosexuality. But they made it clear that we would and should no longer have any contact with our former companion. For no reason at all. At that point, I rebelled and said to the rector and the spiritual director that I would be meeting him. And I did, discovering among other things the real reason for his expulsion: he had been seen in an area renowned for open-air prostitution. I was about to be ordained and all this unleashed hell upon me. What followed was a fully-fledged campaign waged against me by both my superiors and my peers. I was invited to return home, to my parents. I was

told that this was an opportunity for both myself and the church to reflect on the step I was about to take. Eventually I was expelled, they told me I was unsuited to the priesthood and that I should return in a few years. What saved me then was a person I met during a spiritual retreat, a man who was older than me. We became friends, and then lovers. It was my first time, I was twenty-seven years old. In the meantime, I began to see a psychologist, which was enormously helpful as it allowed me to understand the significance and terrible consequences of the violent sexual repression I had experienced. I later found a bishop from the North, I believe he was also a homosexual, who eventually ordained me.”

In some cases, the gratification that comes from seminary life, combined with the unconscious desire to repress the truth of one’s own sexual orientation, cause a protracted deferment of affection. This is what happened to Father Giuliano and was also the case for Giuseppe, a young man from a working-class family that wasn’t particularly religious who, like so many, stopped attending church after his confirmation. During his military service in the 1980s, Father Giuseppe met a member of an ecclesiastical movement, took part in a number of prayer meetings and immediately converted, thinking in that moment that he had found a way to give

his life meaning, finally making it joyful and full. At one of the group meetings, Giuseppe met a girl with whom he began a relationship that would last three and a half years. Exactly the same amount of time that preceded his decision to enter the seminary and become a priest. During that time, the couple had only been sexually active to a point. At the time, the two young people had said this was for religious reasons, because they both wanted to remain virgins. However, as time went on, the relationship progressively became less intense and finally came to an end with Giuseppe's decision to enter the seminary. "I have to tell you," he tells me now, years later and after extensive therapy, "that I was never really that attracted by the female. I never felt repulsed by women, but actually I spent time with them more out of duty than anything else, because it seemed to me that it was what I should be doing. In any case, during those three years of being in a relationship something happened that, at least momentarily, raised my suspicions, my questions about my sexual identity. It happened during a trip to the lake. Our group was being hosted by a monastery, and a monk there showed real warmth towards me, a great desire to get to know me better and know everything about me. At one point, we ended up alone in a room in a secluded part of the monastery and oral sex act was performed.

He did everything. I just stood there immobile, as if paralysed, shocked by what was happening. It felt like a kind of psychological violence, an almost-rape that had been made possible by my ingenuity. After the shock I felt in the days that immediately followed, I archived the event as proof of a moment of weakness, nothing particularly significant, nothing to worry about. I entered the monastery a few months later and from that moment on, my passion for God dominated my entire life. I didn't even masturbate anymore, and I viewed my many nocturnal ejaculations as a purely biological phenomenon. Sex didn't seem necessary to me, because sexual activity (as far as I was concerned back then) was linked to sentimental relationships and I told myself, that if I didn't have one then I didn't need to have sex. And I thought back then that if one day I did have problems with that particular issue, then God would come to my rescue. I was so naïve, Marco! It took the dramatic events of the following years and dozens of therapy sessions to help me understand that I had truly understood nothing about myself and other men.

This brings us to the stories of those who have had sexual relationships in the seminary, starting with those who, like Father Valerio who, much like Carlo in the story I told previously, discovered the rudiments of practical sexuality in the seminary. He entered

the seminary as an adult around the age of twenty-five, having already graduated from university, and it was only then that he fully understood his sexual orientation. “Look,” he told me at a certain point in the long interview he gave me from his rectory, “the seminary was so completely impregnated with homosexuality that it was undoubtedly an excellent place to become gay. I had always suspected I was ‘different’, that I wasn’t attracted to women. I had had girlfriends, but had never done anything physical, nor had I wanted to, not even for a second. I strongly suspected I was only attracted to men, but the problem was that of all my ‘long-term’ friends, school mates and those I met at university, or the friends from my area, no one was openly gay, not one person. I imagined that I would have found a similar situation at the seminary, but I was completely wrong. The seminary, I realised almost instantly, was full of gays! Things tended to work as they did between myself and Michele, my first partner, a man one year older than me. We were a fairly small group of students because my diocese was relatively small. We immediately became friends. It was very easy for him, who was already ‘well versed’, to convince me to get into bed with him. One evening, we were in his room sitting on the bed, and he placed his hand on my knee. It began as a game and we quickly

ended up having sex. For the first time in my life! It was, as I would only discover afterwards, ‘priestly’ sex, deprived of any sentiment, just a physical thing: exclusively carnal and genital. We never embraced or kissed. We never shared a tender gesture, not so much as a caress during all the years we were having sex with one another. Michele, the future Father Michele, now vicar apostolic of my diocese and prospective future bishop, never once named what we were doing. He tried to avoid any reference to that ‘thing’. I found this attitude monstrous. I wanted to understand. For me it was absolutely not just a game, it wasn’t just a case of sexual pleasure and orgasms, but something far more profound and important, something I had inside and that the context in which I had lived had helped me to deny for so long. One day, I told him brusquely, “Let’s be honest Michele. We are gay”. “Speak for yourself,” he answered coldly, “I’m not gay at all”. I think he was in terrible fear of himself, of accepting his own homosexuality. There are rumours he now has frequent panic attacks. This doesn’t surprise me, because I believe he identifies so entirely with his role and lives so separately from himself, as it were, that he has renounced any kind of authenticity, instead leading a false, double existence. In any case, at the beginning all this shocked me to such a point I felt the need to

discuss it immediately with the spiritual director. I told him about it and asked him if it wouldn't be better if I, for the good of everyone, myself and my church, left the seminary immediately, given that homosexuality, particularly when practiced, would, according to the Vatican documents, be a major reason for exclusion from the Catholic priesthood. He looked at me with complete understanding and told me not to be hasty, that what had happened to me was 'normal', that I could absolutely be a priest even after my discovery, and that what was important was that I prayed a lot and tried to control my desires, that I entrust myself to the Virgin Mary and try with constancy and determination not to fall into any more temptation. He essentially reassured me and convinced me to stay in the seminary. Nobody really took my struggle seriously, no one helped me face my homosexuality. No one actually cared for me beyond facile rhetoric and set phrases. And yet all of my superiors, I'm convinced, were gay themselves. The most ridiculous thing is that they were all very concerned with keeping the seminarians away from women. As if that were the problem! There was nothing easier than staying away from women given the raging homosexuality at the seminary."

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Marco Marzano

The Chastes' Caste

LA CASTA DEI CASTI

A collection of priests' lives, among secrets, faults, silences: from the seminary years to their pastoral life, a study on the less told-about effects of the "sacralisation" of the religious people.

The clergy chastity has been discussed within the Catholic Church for centuries. At the beginning of the 21st century it is again of crucial importance, not only because of the sexual scandals and the abuses on minors perpetrated in many dioceses all around the world, but out of a wider and impellent debate about bachelor itself. During many years of research Marco Marzano has collected many priests' testimonies about their personal experiences, their sufferings, their solitude, doubts and certainties: we are now offered a big picture of a religious community open to the world but also forced to keep quiet and hide a part of their life instead of fully living it.

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