

## Tames in Clerical Life

**T**he profound problems that beset priestly life today have been discussed for the most part by means of categories that reflect the preoccupations of our time and the way in which the problems have come to our attention. Because sexual scandal has figured so largely in the contemporary crisis, the now conventional division of male populations into gays and straights has, not surprisingly, played a large part in these discussions. But the reality is considerably more complex than the standard vocabulary of "sexual orientation" would suggest. Though it seems contradictory, even the battles over issues of sexuality among priests<sup>1</sup> may have their basis in personal factors in which sexuality itself plays a relatively minor role.

What is here proposed is that the contemporary priesthood exhibits a disturbingly high number of one particular sociopsychological type, to be designated by the neologism "tame," and what follows is a first attempt to sketch a profile of the tame priest. The author is innocent of training in psychology and the data have been neither collected nor analyzed systematically; they are simply the result of twenty

years of observing the subject at close hand. The description is addressed to the experience of those familiar with the current condition of clerical life, and to the common-sense intuitions of others.

Perhaps the most universal and distinctive characteristic of tames is their paradoxical combination of great sociability with an incapacity for true friendship. Tames are great mixers at parties and all social functions, and they have the ability to join in almost all conversations and project friendly interest. In the jargon of the MBA they are abundantly endowed with "people skills." Yet their friendliness itself makes them unfit for friendship. They exist on the level of superficial companionability, and lack the depth of personality and character necessary to make and keep a friend. Whereas most men in their late twenties unconsciously begin to narrow the number and deepen the quality of their friendships, tames preserve a kind of adolescent gregariousness and live on in the world of the fraternity or freshman dorm. While they tend to be cheerful on social occasions, the mask occasionally slips to show a characteristic expression of apprehension, hunger, and puzzlement. Strong friendships draw one apart from the crowd, and being out of the mainstream and on the margins is something a tame cannot tolerate.

*This piece by an anonymous American cleric first saw the light of day in the old Latin Mass Magazine in 1996. It reads well 20 years later. The phenomenon is certainly still with us. —EDITOR*

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<sup>1</sup> To be understood as clerics in the broad popular sense, including seminarians, religious brothers, diocesan and religious priests, bishops, etc.

Tames prefer instead to exercise their talent in the public arena, where they can flit from buddy to buddy, chatting, telling jokes, fetching drinks and collecting from as many as possible the external tokens of friendship.

Being tame is not itself a sexual orientation, yet within the clerical life tames tend to behave politically, socially, and morally in a manner as uniform as that of gays.<sup>2</sup> It is part of the syndrome that tames are not conscious of themselves as tames: there is no question of their forming a caucus as do gays. Yet because their responses to concrete crises and problems are so uniform tames comprise a block *de facto*, and have an influence in the Church disproportionate to their number. In fact, the defeats and frustrations visited upon straights in the clergy are primarily due not to gays but to tames.

It is usually very hard to know whether a particular tame priest is heterosexual or homosexual. They are seldom obviously effeminate; most laymen will assume, in default of indications to the contrary, that they are straight. But they wear their masculinity as a businessman might wear a baseball cap at a picnic; his support for his team is not necessarily insincere, but you get the feeling that it is *displayed* as an emblem of good will—"I'm an easy-to-get-along-with kind of guy"—and not as a constitutive part of who he is. Tames never seem entirely at peace with this aspect of their lives and,

2 I use the term "homosexual" to refer to someone whose libido is directed at members of his own sex. By "gay" I mean a homosexual male who has made a definitive personal decision to allow himself to be known as homosexual at least semipublicly, and who is tolerant of sodomy; in this scheme all gays are homosexual, but not all homosexuals are gay.

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in situations where gays and straights are clearly at odds, live in a kind of emotional No Man's Land. This is not because tames waver between competing appetites like bisexuals, but because any definitive involvement risks isolation, and isolation terrifies them.

One external indication of the tame seminarian or priest is the changes of dress to which he will subject himself. Sometimes he will change clothes four or five times a day, depending on the activity planned and (more importantly) on who will be in the company. Tames will own the full array of clerical gear, but are also outfitted as laymen for a wide range of formal and informal occasions. Tames live in the present, in the "now"; they are extraordinarily sensitive to the people in the same room with them, they intuitively grasp the balance of power, the divisions of opinion, the dominant party or ethos. Their overadaptability in clothing is symptomatic of their overadaptability generally. Tames are capable of astonishing changes of opinion depending on the composition of their company-of-the-moment; it is not quite accurate to say they are chameleons, because in a sharply contrasted environment they will not adapt themselves to the majority if the minority clearly has greater power and prestige. Always and everywhere, tames will go with a winner.

Tames lack strong personal opinions and highly individual tastes in authors, music, films and so forth. They

may buy many books and be great concert- and moviegoers, but such interests either from the nexus of socialability provided by these activities, or from the negative consideration that ignorance of the current issues or artists might isolate them from those who count. This may be disguised by the fact that in certain communities at certain times it becomes fashionable to have a bizarre hobby or cultivate an esoteric composer, and a tame will play along by affecting an unconventional interest; usually these are abandoned with relief as soon as possible. On the other hand, tames are pathetically envious of the flesh-and-blood solidity of the unfeigned enthusiasms of others, envious of the spiritual freedom to enjoy something, anything, purely in and for itself and without regard to what others think or say. Like ghosts that must feed on the blood of the living, tames are often emotional parasites who draw their satisfactions at second hand; they may be incapable of taking a real interest in fly-fishing or Palestrina or astronomy, but they are fascinated by the single-hearted devotion of those who do, and like to mimic the motions of the enthusiast.

Tame priests are without exception worldly. Their worldliness, however, is always a nervous worldliness, and they never allow themselves to wallow in pleasures as do gays or simple hedonists. Tames dress better, dine better, drink better Scotch, take more expensive vacations, and generally entertain

themselves at a higher level than their fellows, but their enjoyment is poisoned by constant reference to what others may think of their acquisitions and recreations. They are always on guard against equal and opposite dangers: censure for unbecoming profligacy or for unbecoming rusticity. Even at his favorite restaurant a tame is seldom at ease, not knowing who may walk through the door and see him: is the wine too common or too extravagant, his dress too clerical or too casual?

A “giveaway” characteristic of a tame is panic. Tames live in terror of being caught out—of being discovered on the wrong side of an argument, backing the wrong horse, having committed too deeply to reverse course with grace. As a consequence a tame will often register a momentary flash of panic when something occurs to make him unsure of his surroundings—for example, the entrance of an unknown party into a conversation in which he has prematurely taken a stand, or the friendly approach of a pariah at a public function. Tames see failure and unpopularity as contagious, and will oil their way out of contact with either as soon as possible. In their dealings with equals tames often make them feel used—not because they deliberately and cynically set out to manipulate, but because they are virtually incapable of exchanging a human (or supernatural) good with another person.

Tames have a morbid *lack* of curiosity about the first principles of things: metaphysics, the grounding of moral arguments, dogma. This does not come from any lack of brainpower but is simply a reflex of their concern for the here-and-now. The functional/pragmatic/political is supreme. A tame may hold an office that obliges him to defend some moral or dogmatic

principle as inviolable and he may do it competently, but always with an eye to the occasion; even defense of principle, for a tame, is itself not principled but simply a means to realize some practical good. In general, tames have a distaste for confrontation and avoid situations where they are forced into conflict. In most controversial situations tames hedge their bets by showing mild support for both sides as long as possible, only declaring allegiance when it is clearly to their advantage to do so. Tames are capable of professing directly contrary opinions within a matter of hours, and frequently shock others by their apostasies. Because they

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adapt so spontaneously to the environment they are sometimes unconscious of inconsistency and puzzled when it is brought to their attention. Tames are rarely capable of loyalty in the strict sense, but only the kind of loyalty salesmen show to their products or lawyers to their clients-of-the-moment; they are Company Men, spirited defenders of the institution in which they wish to advance.

Tames tend to be dutiful in the same way that they are loyal. They are

“responsible citizens” in the places where they live and work. They are team players and willing to work long hours; they are eager not to give others cause for complaint, and they tend to make themselves—if not indispensable—important worker bees in the machinery of the chancery or seminary or office of religious education. In addition to the energy that comes with ambition, tames have the sort of managerial affability that attracts favorable notice in any bureaucracy. They are relatively unlikely to leave the priesthood; thus, if tames make up only 30% of a seminary entrance, they may well compose 70% of those still working as priests ten years after ordination.

The religious convictions of tames are tailored to conform to those of the environment, especially to the most influential forces in the environment. Tames are liberal in liberal dioceses and conservative in conservative ones, but are willing to sing the same song as whatever group they find themselves part of, whether it be a carload of fellow priests on the way to a beach house or a dozen older women at a communion breakfast. Neither as liberals nor as conservatives do they display any depth of concern for the spiritual life; their personal Bibles and breviaries rarely show the telltale damage of daily use; neither do tames themselves react to the crises in the life of the Church as if their principal import were spiritual. Yet their religiosity also contains unpredictable sentimental attachments to the worship of their youth: a man of conventional secular outlook may on occasion display a sugary Marian devotion or passionately object to the rewording of a favorite hymn from the past. Parallel to the envy tames have for genuine friendship is this attitude of lovelorn regret for their own

childhood, when perhaps affections were still pristine and not warped by the need to have a concrete practical advantage. Even when their theology is up to date and deftly articulated, tames give the impression that they “stopped listening” spiritually at about the age of nine or ten; they seem stunted, and unaware of the lack.

In the contemporary Church tames serve the agenda of gays in the long run, even though they sometimes find themselves forced to take a contrary stance. Tames are extremely susceptible to emotional blackmail of all kinds, and gays are adept at putting a thumb on the emotional windpipe of weak men in order to manipulate them.<sup>3</sup> Of course this takes many forms; one of the simplest (playing on the tame avoidance of conflict) is to engender a stormy atmosphere in a room in which the gay agenda is under discussion, with the threat of outrage and vengeance if the correct conclusion is not reached. Tames will often sell the pass to avoid the risk of having to fight for it before a wider public.

Gays have also pulled the tames into their service by the gambit of discussing chastity and sexuality in terms of “affective maturity.” This is how it works: first, one wins the admission that “affective maturity” is the principal gauge of authentic celibacy. Once this is conceded, it is stipulated that the condition *sine qua non* of affective maturity is “comfort” with one’s own sexuality (mature men are comfortable being themselves), and this in turn is seen to preclude disgust or moral censure directed at a “sexuality other

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than one’s own.” A Caucasian at peace with his racial dignity does not derogate blacks; by the same token a straight at peace with himself does not look askance at gays. Whoever objects to the presence or influence of gays in priestly life is *ipso facto* convicted of affective immaturity and his opinion thereby disqualified. Tames are without exception pushed into emotional checkmate by this maneuver, and invariably side with gays in showdowns, intuitively (and correctly) realizing that his tactic will prevail at any ecclesiastical institution that surfaces the issue in these terms.<sup>4</sup> By this ploy, and variations on the theme, gay priests have been able to leverage their clout three or four times out of proportion to their numbers. The paradoxical truth is that tames are more effective agents of the gay agenda than gays themselves; on one hand they are more presentable advocates (unef-feminate, good at reassurance, good at string-pulling), on the other they are

motivated by a terror of the either/or and of being thrust to the margins of the institution—a terror stronger even than the hopes and anxieties of gays. The tame commitment to be noncommittal is the engine that powers gay progress in the Church.<sup>5</sup>

It will be clear that tames tend to be ambitious (generally) and careerist (specifically) to an extent unhealthy in any institution and particularly in the Church. Yet they are not purely cynical climbers of the type met more frequently in business or politics. They are not cynical because they lack the psychological detachment necessary for cynicism—the ability to put a distance between themselves and their own tactics. They enter into the role demanded by the moment so deeply that they really believe they are “witnesses for renewal” at nine o’clock and really believe they are guardians of orthodoxy at eleven. When a tame succeeds in reaching a position of authority—as a bishop, rector, provincial superior—the increase in the amount of stress combined with the decrease in places to hide causes highly erratic behavior and reveals his radical emotional instability. Once in power, tames are ravenous for personal loyalty.

5 It should be stressed that the ecclesial landscape in which tames feel safest is largely congruent with the current clerical agenda: what gays view as a tactical advantage tames require as a psychological necessity. Both want the Church’s moral and doctrinal terrain to be as fuzzy as possible; both like to live in the “high grass” and rejoice in bureaucratic vagueness and ambiguity. The strongest emotion tames ever show is the hatred of those who try to force them over the fence or put things in black-and-white terms; most younger priests can attest that the highest-voltage diatribes against homophobia they have encountered were delivered not by gays but by tames.

3 Some gays have themselves “emerged” from the condition of tames and are able to exploit the insecurities of tames from their own experience; they know the psychological pressure points from inside.

4 Examples of these controversies might be: Whether to admit homosexuals to the seminary, whether to allow a gay rights group on a Catholic campus; whether to make condom education part of a workshop on sexuality; whether pastoral care of AIDS patients should have a moral component, etc.

It might be said that their demand for personal fealty is in proportion to their own incapacity for adherence to principle, that the oilier they were to superiors the more peremptory they are in their dealings with underlings. Their uses of authority and failures to use authority seem equally arbitrary, and the “management style” typical of tames includes long periods of seeming paralysis broken by sudden quixotic sorties.

Concern for appearance, distaste for conflict and fondness for the advantageous lie are the main factors contributing to this tame style of management—two styles, actually, depending on whether they are dealing in private or in the public sphere. In one-on-one situations, for example, tames in positions of authority will rarely deny the validity of a complaint of corruption lodged by a subordinate. More often they will admit the reality and seriousness of the problem raised, and then pretend to take the appellant into their confidence, assuring him that those in charge are fully aware of the crisis and that steps are being taken, quietly, behind the scenes, to remedy it. Thus the burden of discretion is shifted onto the subordinate in the name of concern for the good of the institution and personal loyalty to the administrator: he must not go public with his evidence of malfeasance lest he disrupt the process—invariably hidden from view—by which it is being put right. This ruse has been called the Secret Santa maneuver: “There are no presents underneath the tree for you, but that’s because Daddy is down in the basement making you something special. It’s supposed to be a surprise, so don’t breathe a word or you’ll spoil everything.” And, of course,

Christmas never comes. Perhaps most of the well-intentioned efforts for reform of the past quarter century have been tabled indefinitely by high-ranking tames using this ploy to buy their way out of tough situations for which they are temperamentally unsuited.

The public arena brings forth from tames another side of their personality. Tames lack the resources of character to remain indifferent to hostile news media; moreover, the techniques of

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evasion and equivocation refined earlier in their lives are largely useless as bishops, when the media (and general public) reflexively attribute to them as their own the positions of the Catholic Church. A few tames are able to charm the media into a kind of truce: good ink in exchange for a blind eye toward heterodoxy; several others can be seen to engage in a disastrous cycle of appeasement and recrimination. They sue for the favor of the press by taking pains to portray themselves as moderates and by lashing out at more aggressive conservatives, causing dismay to many of the Church’s friends

and giving delight to her enemies. Then an occasion arises when they are forced to defend some unpopular teaching, and the press turns against them with glee. Then comes the bishop’s predictable sputter of indignation, their predictable semiretraction and statement of regret, and the long, long process of buying their way backing into the state of (editorial) grace by undercutting less diffident Catholics.<sup>6</sup>

From this provisional attempt at description it will be clear that the distinguishing characters of tames are for the most part destructive of what the Church needs to accomplish through her clergy. The U.S. Church may be especially instructive in this regard. Seventeen years into the pontificate of a “conservative” Pope, concerned to appoint dutiful and orthodox bishops, the problems of clerical homosexuality and pedophilia, doctrinal dissent of the professorate, liturgical abuses, acceptance of contraception, etc., have improved in no respect and worsened in many. It is reasonable to assume that there is not a single cause for this strange paralysis, but it is worth asking whether the prevalence of the tame priest does not go far to explain the combination of outward managerial competence and personal moral cowardice that has examined these problems so often, so “professionally,” and never lit on the obvious steps toward their solution.

6 It is noteworthy that bishops who are tames almost always have a number of gays as advisors or high officials in the chancery; once in office they are virtually powerless to prevent gays from collecting around them, and as a consequence any pressures for reform are effectively neutralized.