

Screening The Priests

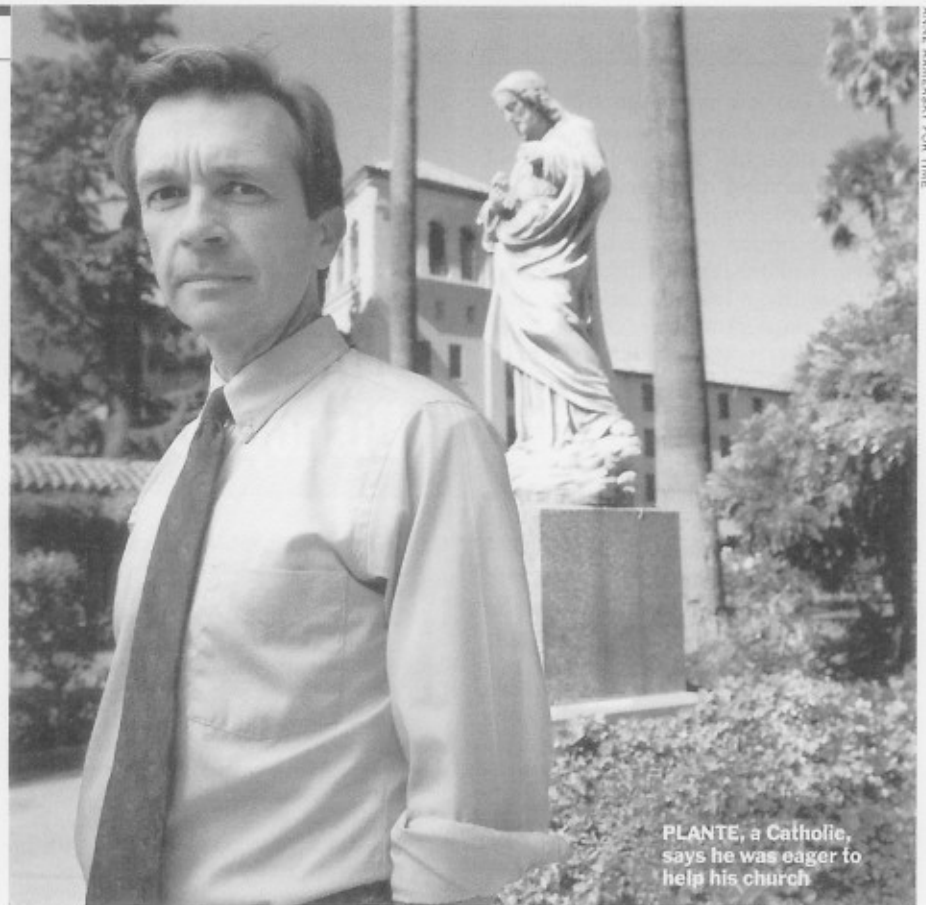
How do the church's shrinks decide who is gay and who isn't? The first thing they do is ask

By DAVID VAN BIEMA and SEAN SCULLY/PHILADELPHIA

THOMAS PLANTE ASKS THE QUESTION roughly 20 times a year, and if it doesn't work, he's ready with the follow-up. "You say, 'Well, tell me what your dating history is like,'" explains the Santa Clara University psychology professor. "And usually they'll hand it to you on a silver platter. If they don't, you say, 'Well, do you find yourself more interested in involvement with women or with men?' If they say, 'I've never dated,' you say, 'Well, when you walk down the street, who catches your eye?'" And so, gently but relentlessly, Plante, one of several dozen U.S. therapists who screen candidates for Roman Catholic seminaries, attempts to ensure that the church knows the sexual orientation of one more would-be priest.

For the past month, screeners like Plante have braced for a new directive from the Vatican. In the wake of the sexual-abuse scandal among U.S. clergy—in which some 80% of the victims were boys—the church seemed poised to carry out a blanket ban on admitting homosexuals, even celibate gays, to its seminaries. Italian newspapers, however, are now reporting that Pope Benedict XVI had signed a somewhat less extreme "instruction." (See *accompanying story*.) But while awaiting that edict, the psychologists like Plante, who (among other things) help determine whether prospective seminarians are gay, have been drawn into a debate about that particular aspect of their job. Predominantly Catholic but not necessarily ordained, most of these psychologists are quite comfortable with the notion of celibate gay priests. And most are quick to point out, as Plante does, that "being homosexual doesn't put you at higher risk for committing sexual offenses against kids."

Fifty years ago, Plante's sideline—he has done roughly 175 seminary evaluations



PLANTE, a Catholic, says he was eager to help his church

since 1988, at about \$450 apiece—did not exist. While seminaries have always screened candidates through interviews, personal references and, often, written spiritual autobiographies, the process has become increasingly complex and now takes one to three years. Testing by professional psychologists, introduced in the '50s, has proliferated in the past two decades as the American church has redefined spirituality from a narrow focus on piety and discipline to one "involving things like the psychological and social maturity on which spirituality builds," explains Charles Bouchard, president of the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis, Mo. Supporters of the added vetting believe that it may eventually be seen to have played a role in reducing priestly sexual abuse, which appears to have crested in the '80s. Says Bouchard: "Unknowingly, we actually screened in some people who, we now realize, had markers for sexual abuse. Compliance, docility and solitariness fit the earlier definition of holiness, but we now recognize [those traits] as possible indicators for an abusive personality."

The mostly secular tools employed by seminary screeners may be familiar to any-

one who has experienced a basic psychological test at a large company. Plante uses the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory test, geared to screening for psychopathologies; a Myers-Briggs-like self-image quiz for characteristics such as introversion or dominance; and a sentence-completion exercise featuring such opening statements as "If I had all the money in the world, I would ..." or "After they had sex, he felt ..." Armed with the results, Plante later sits down for 60 to 90 minutes with the candidate, "specifically looking," he says, "to see if they can handle the vows of religious life."

To that end, he and fellow screeners hope for high scores on empathy and intelligence (one recommends a minimum IQ of 110). They are worried that a predisposition toward solitude, though fine for monks, may bode ill in pastoral settings. They red-flag callings that seem to have been rebound responses to romantic breakups or other traumas and look for unrealistic job expectations (one of Plante's candidates modeled himself after Mother Teresa, down to the year he expected to accept his Nobel Prize). They are especially vigilant for histories of sexual abuse

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combined with low impulse control regarding alcohol, gambling, sex or anger. Many screeners think the combination may put the candidate at risk of becoming an abuser.

Until now they reported on homosexuality not as an intrinsic evil but as a simple data point while addressing a candidate's psychological maturity. A few seminaries nonetheless regard the information as crucial. When a psychologist reports a candidate's describing his prior dating life as "'I didn't go with a girl, I went with a guy for three years,' that's usually a game stopper," says Monsignor Steven Rohlf, rector at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmetsburg, Md. But most in his position are more accepting. Plante reports that one West Coast diocese responded to rumors of Rome's new hard line by asking him to keep homosexual designation out of his final reports, for fear it would hurt gay priests' careers down the line.

That suited Plante, who is comfortable with the 20% to 40% of the priesthood he believes are homosexually oriented. He notes that while Catholic teaching calls homosexuality a disorder, the American Psychiatric Association dropped that descriptive decades ago. "Being gay in and of itself, I would hope, wouldn't prevent someone from becoming a priest," he says. All four church-contracted psychologists interviewed by TIME agreed vociferously with his contention that homosexuality doesn't make one more likely to sexually abuse children. For instance, Father Gerard McGlone, a Jesuit psychologist and a vice president of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, believes some tightening of the admission process is appropriate: "I think to a certain extent the Vatican is correct in trying to weed out unhealthy expressions of the homosexual experience." But he is also worried that tougher guidelines might backfire by encouraging gay or sexually confused priests to deceive themselves about their own orientation, which could lead to a subsequent crisis and pathology.

In any case, says Plante, when new rules come down, he will soldier on. His entry into this line of consulting, he recalls, was a little like being an Army reservist: "They called: 'You're a shrink. You're Catholic. You can help us.' How do you say no?" And he notes that "there are a lot of things we don't agree with in the church, but we still identify as Catholic."

In fact, given the reported subtlety of the impending decree, he may not even find himself in disagreement. But it may take more than three quick questions for him, not to mention his future interviewees, to parse it all out. ■

THE VATICAN

What Will the Bishops Do Next?

It no longer appears a question of if, but how the Vatican will try to restrict homosexuals from joining the priesthood. As 256 of the world's bishops gathered in Rome for a three-week synod—the first under Pope Benedict XVI—details filtered out to the Italian press that something a bit less draconian than a blanket ban was in the works. A long-shelved document providing specific admission instructions to seminaries is expected to be issued in November. The "instruction" from the Congregation for Catholic Education would add some teeth to a long-standing but often loosely enforced ban on the ordination of gays, but it would also allow seminary officials some leeway.

The new directive updates a 1961 document that bars from the priesthood "those who are afflicted with evil tendencies to homosexuality or pederasty." According to the leading Italian daily, *Corriere della Sera*, and other newspapers, the new instruction provides much more specific guidance on whom to exclude. First, it is said to eliminate from consideration anyone who has engaged in gay sexual relations in the previous three years. Second, it would bar those who openly declare their homosexuality or take part in gay life by, say, visiting gay-oriented websites and bookstores and gay-pride events. According to the *National Catholic Reporter*, a third, more loosely defined strike would go against seminary candidates whose homosexual orientation is sufficiently "strong" and "permanent" as to make the all-male environment of a seminary a temptation to sexual activity. Gays already in the priesthood

would not be affected by the new document, which was signed by Benedict in September, according to *Corriere della Sera*.

A senior Vatican official told TIME that a more absolute ban on homosexuality would be impossible to enforce. "What does it mean to be gay?" he asks. "You have to acknowledge the complexity of the situation, but you also have to enforce the discipline." The first step, according to this official, is ridding the priesthood of those who proudly acknowledge a gay identity. "It's almost like glorying in the sin," he said. The church says gays should be

treated with dignity, but its 1992 update of the catechism calls homosexual acts "intrinsically disordered."

Yet restricting gays from the priesthood may not be just a question of staying true to doctrine. Sources close to then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger say he was outraged by details of the clergy sex-abuse crisis in the U.S. and elsewhere and the high rate of priests preying

on teenage boys. And although there is no correlation between homosexuality and pedophilia, the current Vatican thinks cracking down on the former will help correct the latter.

Still, in its official deliberations last week, neither the abuse scandals nor the issue of homosexual clergy came up in more than 100 remarks made during the first five days, despite the fact that Benedict invited the synod to engage in its first "free discussion" segment. One piece of sobering news, however, was repeatedly raised: the shortage of priests around the world, no matter what their sexual inclination. —By Jeff Israely/Rome

The Pope has been outraged by the high rate of priests preying on boys