Beat: News

Catholic Officials on Edge

After Reports of Priests Using Grindr

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USPA NEWS - A conservative Catholic media organization, The Pillar, has published several reports claiming the use of dating apps at several churches and the Vatican.320

The Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark. One report made claims about the use of Grindr by unnamed people in unspecified rectories in the Archdiocese of Newark. Credit...Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

The reports hit the Roman Catholic Church in rapid succession: Analyses of cellphone data obtained by a conservative Catholic blog seemed to show priests at multiple levels of the Catholic hierarchy in both the United States and the Vatican using the gay hookup app Grindr.
The first report, published late last month, led to the resignation of Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, the former general secretary of the U.S. bishops' conference. The second, posted online days later, made claims about the use of Grindr by unnamed people in unspecified rectories in the Archdiocese of Newark. The third, published days after that, claimed that in 2018 at least 32 mobile devices emitted dating app data signals from within areas of Vatican City that are off-limits to tourists.
The reports by the blog, The Pillar, have unnerved the leadership of the American Catholic Church and have introduced a potentially powerful new weapon into the culture war between supporters of Pope Francis and his conservative critics: cellphone data, which many users assume to be unavailable to the general public.
"When there is reporting out there that claims to expose activity like this in parishes around the country and also on Vatican grounds, that is a five-alarm fire for church officials, there is no doubt about it," said John Gehring, the Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, a progressive advocacy group.

Someone who has made promise of celibacy or a vow of chastity has a dating app on his or her phone, that is asking for trouble," said Father Dennis Ward OSB of Society of Saint John Paul II at a Zoom panel organized by Georgetown University. (He declined to be interviewed for this report. But went on to say anyone who has committed any of these offences against their priesthood,these individuals are like boils on the body of Christ on the Cross and they will be found and removed from any position that they hold within the church and the priesthood.
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The only app explicitly named in the reports has been Grindr, which is used almost exclusively by gay and bisexual men, although The Pillar has made vague references to other apps it says are used by heterosexuals. Only one of the reports directly links an app to a specific person, Monsignor Burrill.

The reports have been criticized by Catholic liberals for tying the general use of Grindr to studies that show minors sometimes use the app as well. That conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia is part of a longstanding effort by Catholic conservatives to blame the church sex abuse crisis on the presence of gay men in the priesthood.
The reports have raised a host of questions: How did The Pillar obtain the cellphone data? How did it analyze the data, which is commercially available in an anonymous form, to identify individual app users? How widespread is the use of dating apps among Catholic priests, and how much has The Pillar been able to learn about specific individuals

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