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## Courage founder pushed bishops to resist zero tolerance on abuse

Christopher White Oct 8, 2018  
NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT



(Credit: AP.)

ROME - Amid this summer's wave of sexual abuse scandals, the Catholic apostolate Courage lauded its founder, Father John Harvey, who died in 2010, for his work with priests who "experienced same sex attractions and were striving to live chaste celibate lives."

Yet while Courage proclaimed Harvey a "prudent spiritual director" and "a keen student of moral theology and psychology," a review of his writings and public speeches raises new questions about how his approach to homosexuality - his belief that one could, in fact, change his or her sexual orientation - seems to have influenced his approach to treating abusive priests, advocating, at times, for their rehabilitation and return to ministry.

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Throughout his career, Harvey often had a platform to offer U.S. bishops such advice. In addition, his close association with a prominent psychologist who also argued against the permanent removal of abuser priests, and who was a sought-after expert for treatment, has also led critics to wonder about their influence in shaping the U.S. Church's early response to the sexual abuse crisis.

## ***Harvey and the Abuse Scandal***

In the 1970s, Harvey founded a new ministry called "Renewal, Rest, and Recreation," with the aim of providing support for priests with "sexual difficulties," primarily homosexuality. In 1980, that ministry led to an invitation from Cardinal Terrance Cooke of New York to form a ministry for lay Catholics called "Courage."

In 1994, Courage received Vatican approval from Colombian Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, then-president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, and according to its executive director, Father Philip Bochanski, Courage is now active in two-thirds of the dioceses in the United States and 15 other countries worldwide.

"Much of the spread of the apostolate in the first three decades was a direct result of Father Harvey's willingness to travel anywhere he was invited to speak on the topic of same sex attraction and to consult with people," Bochanski told *Crux*.

Chief among Harvey's interested audience members were U.S. bishops who, in addition to inviting him to start the ministry in their own local dioceses, gave Harvey a national platform.

Father Thomas Dailey, a close friend of Harvey's who edited a book on his legacy, told *Crux* that "both his work with Courage and also his prominence in the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, put him in a very good light among the bishops."

In a 1992 article in *Crisis*, a conservative magazine, Harvey described the arguments he had offered at the Ninth Bishops' Workshop in Dallas in 1990. Harvey argued that priests who sexually abused minors often did so because of sexual addiction, and therefore guilt could not be imputed. On that basis, he claimed bishops could not impose canonical penalties.

Instead, he argued, most should be rehabilitated and returned to ministry. While he went on to note that there should be certain conditions, such as barring participation in overseeing youth ministry, he criticized bishops for a double standard in not treating abuser priests the same way as they often treat alcoholics or drug addicts, who are generally sent to rehab and then put back in the field.

In the article, he criticized bishops moving toward a zero-tolerance policy.

"Rather than concentrating on rehabilitating troubled priests, authorities too often merely 'shelve' them, permitting them only the ministry of private Mass and/or pushing hard for their immediate laicization," he wrote.

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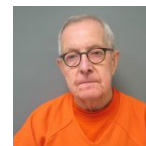
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In short, Harvey aimed to convince the bishops to adopt “a more hopeful view of priests and religious who had been involved in such behavior.”

While Bochanski told *Crux* that in the article, “[Harvey] stated clearly that those whose sexual attractions are completely oriented toward children or youth ‘should not be restored to any pastoral ministry’,” the article also makes clear that Harvey believed “relatively few” priests who sexually abused minors fit in that category.

For the rest, he believed that a return would be okay under qualified conditions, and he went on to recommend treatment similar to that of a 12-Step-Program, “the heart of which is faith and prayer - so that he keeps himself at a distance from any unsupervised contact with youth.”

### ***Richard Fitzgibbons’ Influence on Harvey***

One of Harvey’s closest associates and clinical influencers was psychiatrist Richard Fitzgibbons, who trained at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Child Guidance Center, and who went on to found the Institute for Marital Healing.

In his 1987 book *The Homosexual Person*, Harvey wrote of working with Fitzgibbons on “crisis intervention,” with abusive priests. Fitzgibbons has also been a regular presence at Courage’s annual conferences, including this past summer’s gathering, which celebrated the life and legacy of Harvey on what would have been his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Along with his public appearances and praise from Harvey, Fitzgibbons’ work is cited on the Courage website, and he contributed a 37-page appendix on “The Origins and Healing of Homosexual Attractions and Behaviors” to Harvey’s 1996 book, *The Truth about Homosexuality: The Cry of the Faithful*.

A common theme that emerges in Fitzgibbons’ work is that of forgiveness and the “restoration of hope.” While highly critical of priests who reject the Catholic Church’s traditional teachings on sexual morality, Fitzgibbons’ clinical record in a number of high-profile cases, along with his decades-long work with Harvey, evidences a preference for rehabilitation of priests who commit sexual abuse, similar to their approach to homosexual individuals whom they sought to aid in changing orientation.

For example, in January 2011, Fitzgibbons was asked to do a forensic assessment of a Kansas City priest named Father Shawn Ratigan. In May

2010, the principal at Ratigan's parish had sent a memo to the diocese raising concerns about Ratigan's interactions with young girls in the school. The memo focused on boundary violations, not actual sexual abuse.

In December 2010, however, a computer repairman found hundreds of photographs of young girls on Ratigan's laptop, including up-skirt shots and a series of pictures of a very young girl's diaper being pulled down, finally revealing her genitals.

According to an independent report commissioned by the diocese, "Following his initial meetings with Ratigan, Fitzgibbons advised Bishop Robert Finn that Ratigan was suffering from loneliness and depression caused in part by the fact that Principal Hess was 'out to get him.'" Even after he saw copies of the pictures from Ratigan's laptop, he denied that any of the photos qualified as child pornography.

Courts disagreed, however, and sentenced Ratigan to 50 years in prison for producing child pornography.

Both Harvey and Fitzgibbons were co-authors of the 1999 pamphlet "Homosexuality and Hope," published by the Catholic Medical Association, which maintains that individuals are not born with a same-sex attraction and that such individuals are at greater risk for psychiatric disorders. The authors also advocate therapy in order to prevent or change such attractions.

Accordingly, both individuals embraced psychoanalytical theories and practices made popular by Elizabeth Moberly and Joseph Nicolosi, outlining a program of "conversion therapy" for homosexual individuals. Harvey and Fitzgibbons would seek to apply that approach to priests who either sought help, or who were sent for treatment following the abuse of male minors.

As a moral theologian by training rather than a clinical psychologist, Harvey relied heavily on Fitzgibbons along with other like-minded individuals such as Dr. John Money and Dr. John Kinane, who shaped both his thought and practice on how to handle priests with a history of abuse.

### ***Lessons from Philadelphia***

A Pennsylvania Grand Jury report this August chronicling seven decades of abuse of more than 1,000 victims at the hands of 300 abuser priests specifically excluded Philadelphia, largely because an earlier investigation there had already highlighted the efforts by Cardinals John Krol, Anthony Bevilacqua, and Justin Rigali in covering up abuse of minors and knowingly transferring offender priests rather than removing them from public ministry.

As it turns out, those decisions relied on methods taught and advocated by Fitzgibbons and Harvey.

According to a report from Father Thomas Doyle, Monsignor William Lynn, who was the secretary for clergy in Philadelphia from 1992 to 2004, said that the archbishops of Philadelphia often sent both priest-abusers and victims to Harvey and Fitzgibbons.

In February 2011 - after Harvey's death - a Grand Jury investigating the Archdiocese of Philadelphia asked officials "to review all of the old

allegations against currently active priests, and to remove from ministry all priests with credible allegations against them.”

After Rigali placed 21 priests on administrative leave, Fitzgibbons, along with Peter Kleponis, who had treated some of the priests in question, wrote an article criticizing the decision.

Fitzgibbons and Kleponis argued that, “the majority of the 21 priests identified for further evaluation previously went through an intensive process conducted by competent professionals without any new charges being filed against them. The result of the investigation was that the charges were not substantiated against many of those 21 priests. Then, these priests were notified and there was no disruption of their priestly ministry.”

In fact, when the archdiocese completed the process of reviewing these files, only 8 of the 21 priests Fitzgibbons and Kleponis defended - just 38 percent - would be judged suitable for return to ministry.

In that same 2011 article, Fitzgibbons and Kleponis wrote critically of bishops whom they viewed as over-zealous.

“In our clinical experience many of the priests accused of so-called boundary violations were strong in faith and in loyalty while their accusers often harbored resentment toward them,” they wrote.

### ***Zero Tolerance?***

The arguments by Fitzgibbons and Kleponis in 2011 came nearly a decade after the U.S. bishops adopted their Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in which they embraced a “zero-tolerance” policy toward abuse.

Even so, up until at least 2011, Fitzgibbons continued to play a role in treating abusive priests and advocating for their return to ministry in Philadelphia, one of the dioceses most affected by sexual abuse.

While today Courage maintains its strict compliance with the charter, at the time of its adoption, Harvey expressed regret that too many bishops were pushing abusive priests out and advocated a path of treatment.

“In short, the predominant view of the bishops in the ’80s and ’90s was that such men should be given a second chance which included spiritual support, individual spiritual direction, and careful supervision,” he wrote in 2002. “From personal pastoral experience, I saw good things happening with these priests. I also was aware that some of these bishops took good care of the youth who had been victimized by priests.”

Summarizing his views on zero-tolerance, Harvey wrote, “I have grave difficulty with [that] opinion.”

While Bochanski maintains that Harvey’s primary concern was “homosexual priests who were committed to living chastely,” his record offers a more muddled account.

Dailey told *Crux* that “everyone I’ve ever spoken with would say [Harvey’s] kindness and compassion is what drew people to him, coupled with a really keen understanding of the psychological, moral, and theological issues involved. He would teach things in black and white in the classroom, making very clear where the Church stands on things, but when he spoke with people, he understood all the gray areas of life.”

Yet as this review of his writings makes clear, in hindsight, such compassion may have had a downside.

As Bochanski told *Crux*, Harvey’s position on zero-tolerance, “seemed to see a policy of permanent restriction as limiting the power of God’s grace to restore these priests to a chaste life and a meaningful ministry.”

The August release of Pennsylvania’s grand jury report prompted Courage to release a press release clarifying Harvey’s role in responding to the sex-abuse crisis, noting that Harvey was keenly interested in psychological advances and that “were he working today, he would take the advice of these professionals very seriously and shape his pastoral approach accordingly.”

Meanwhile, Bochanski told *Crux* that the organization has asked an “outside expert in moral and pastoral theology to conduct an objective review of Father’s published work to help us understand his approach in context.”

“I hope to be able to share this review with our Courage members in due time,” he said.

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