

The 469th Convocation

Address: "Sexuality, Intimacy, and History"

By George Chauncey

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Congratulations! This is a joyous moment not just for you, but also for those who raised you and those who taught you, for your loved ones and for your university. As a member of the faculty, I want to tell you how rewarding it has been to work with you and how much we value you.

Nowhere else have I found so many students so earnestly engaged with the life of the mind, so many who relish being challenged and taking risks to think seriously and critically about their world. Your intellectual curiosity, openness, and rigor make this one of the most exciting places in America to teach, and I thank you for that.

I am honored to play a small role in your graduation ceremonies, which mark such a momentous transition in your lives. And I feel the burden of the moment, as we all must, since this is also such a momentous and dangerous time in the world. My greatest aspiration for you is that you will take up the challenge this presents by becoming engaged with the great moral and political debates before us, bringing to bear on them the skills and habits of critical thought you have honed here. It has never been more urgent that you do so.

In that spirit, I ask you to think with me today about an issue now pressing for our attention: the growing concern over sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. This is a morally complex and emotionally charged issue, one that has been a source of special heartbreak and anguish for people of faith, and one therefore all the more deserving of thoughtful attention.

As a historian of gender and sexuality in the twentieth century, I want to place this issue in a historical context that might illuminate it. In our relentlessly antihistorical culture, we tend to view this unfolding tragedy as we view most problems—as outside of history, unique, and unprecedented. But I have been struck by two historical antecedents to the current crisis, which, it seems to me, both shape and inform it, and might give us a broader perspective on its significance.

The first and most direct antecedent is the movement over the last several decades to curtail sexual abuse of power in a host of institutional settings—from the work place to the university. Numerous institutions, including this one, have struggled to combat such abuse and to establish grievance procedures that encourage people who have been subjected to unwanted attentions to seek relief. All such institutions have had to wrestle with the complex problem of determining the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate intimacies between unequal parties.

This movement had its origins in feminist critiques of the way men used their greater institutional power to force unwanted sexual attentions on the women who were their subordinates. It gained impetus from the broader movement of our time to undermine social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, religion, and other axes of social difference.

But it has also been inspired by the movement of sexuality into discourse, that is to say, by the historical process through which sexuality became a more explicit subject of representation and discussion, and came to be seen and experienced as a fundamental and uniquely revelatory element of the self and society. We may react variously to the disparate manifestations of this trend. They include the growing sexual explicitness of television and film, the spectacle of a Supreme Court nominee and a sitting president having their sexual lives scrutinized by the press and Congress, and the narrowing of the boundaries of acceptable emotional and physical intimacy between friends of the same sex because of the growing fear that such intimacies will be seen as sexual. And they include the identification of people and denial of their rights on the basis of their sexual orientation, and the growth of political movements such as the gay movement in response. Whatever you think of each of these manifestations, they are related to one another in complex ways and together help characterize our historical moment.

Greater explicitness about sex—naming it, speaking of it, identifying people on the basis of it—does not simply produce sexual liberation and health, as some of its advocates hoped, or sexual license and degeneration, as some of its opponents feared. Whatever else, this visibility produces the conditions and often the impetus for the greater policing of sexual behavior. Intimate relationships between faculty and students were much more common at universities in years past,

when it was easier for such affairs to remain shrouded in secrecy and ambiguity. It is harder to engage in a minor indiscretion when no one anymore is very discreet about sex.

The Catholic Church has had a complex relationship to this trend. In some contexts the church has been quite explicit about sexual matters. It has condemned abortion, erotica, and homosexuality. It has enjoined the faithful to confess their sinful sexual behavior and thoughts, a practice that some historians argue provided a powerful early impetus to sexual discourse. At the same time, it has long fought the explicit representation and discussion of sexual matters and, as recent revelations have shown, it has suppressed knowledge of and even ignored its own internal sexual problems. But now it, too, has suddenly been engulfed by this tide of history, so that, like other major institutions, it can no longer hide the sexual abuse of power within its ranks.

A second antecedent to the current crisis is the history of the sexual demonization of outsiders, especially when that demonization was produced by moral panics over sexuality. For make no mistake about it, the current outburst of revelation, revulsion, and outrage about sexual predators, which suddenly seems on the verge of reshaping the popular image of the clergy, has many precedents. For all its peculiarities, it follows the familiar pattern of moral panics, in which an incident, group, or social problem becomes the subject of popular anxiety and of incessant press coverage that forges powerful new frameworks for viewing the world and stereotypes of outsiders, whose dangerous effects linger long after the panic has subsided.

The Catholic Church itself has often been the object of such campaigns of demonization. In 1930s Germany, for instance, the new Nazi regime regarded the autonomy of the church as an impediment to the consolidation of its authority. When it tried to place Catholic schools under Nazi control and dissolved Catholic youth groups so that only Nazis would organize the social lives and indoctrination of German youth, it justified these controversial steps by claiming they were necessary to save young people from the sexual predation of Catholic priests and monks. The regime went on to denigrate the men in monastic orders as effeminate. They did not adopt the steely masculine style celebrated by Nazi militarism, after all. And their vows of celibacy, the Nazis charged, kept them from producing children for the race and turned them instead to immoral practices, especially pedophilia. To emphasize its point and to intimidate the church, in

1937 the Nazis charged a thousand monks with sexual immorality, and convicted and imprisoned many of them on these charges.

The Nazi demonization of Catholic priests and brothers was part of a deliberate campaign to achieve specific political objectives. Most moral panics are more diffuse in their origins and authorship, involving newspaper reporters, local police, and experts of various stripes rather than a single state authority, and most are therefore less predictable in their outcome. But in making such charges, the Nazis followed a well-established pattern, for the demonization of outsiders as sexually aberrant and dangerous has long been a feature of cultural struggle. Perhaps the most pernicious and enduring example of this in American history is provided by the defenders of white supremacy, who for generations justified segregation and lynching alike by alleging that African Americans had voracious sexual appetites that threatened white women and racial purity. Attributing immoral or abnormal sexual practices exclusively to outsiders has often allowed the dominant culture at once to distinguish itself from those outsiders, to assert its own purity, and to police its own ranks.

Moral panics often give birth to new forms of demonization. A series of panics just before and after the Second World War, for instance, reshaped the dominant image of gay men. Several brutal but isolated sexual attacks on children prompted a series of nationwide police and press campaigns that depicted the country as overrun by murderous sex deviates. Most of the children attacked by men were girls, and many knew their assailants. But the press campaigns ignored this, and claimed instead that strangers and above all homosexuals were the primary threats to children, asserting that their apparently benign nonconformity betrayed more dangerous impulses. As an article in a popular magazine asserted in 1950, “once a man assumes the role of homosexual, he often throws off all moral restraints. . . . Some male sex deviants do not stop with infecting their often-innocent partners: they descend through perversions to other forms of depravity, such as drug addiction, burglary, sadism, and even murder.” The male homosexual had long been regarded as a sissy-man, whom one might ridicule but had no reason to fear. Now he came to be seen as an inveterate child molester and predator.

The familiar stereotype of the gay man as a child molester is not a timeless image, then, but a

product of the moral panics of the 1930s and 1940s. It remains powerful enough today to incite and justify widespread opposition to gay rights, and particularly the rights of gay teachers and gay parents. It also has clearly influenced the way many people understand the current problems besetting the church, even prompting some to call for a purge of homosexuals, as if they all endangered children and as if their absence would end that danger.

How else might we respond to this tragedy?

It is imperative that we recognize and try to repair the terrible harm done to so many individuals that is now coming to light. At the same time, our society depends on people like you, with your critical skills and sensitivity to complexity, to prevent this moral tragedy from turning into a moral panic. For in a panic, distinctive devotional practices, such as the discipline of celibacy, will be interpreted for the worst. Dangerous new stereotypes of the clergy, gay men, and others will wreak their damage.

If this tragedy forces us to ponder how we can respond to the harm done to so many innocents without harming still more innocents, it also raises questions about how we can encourage intimacy while discouraging abuse, and how we can resist conflating intimacy with abuse. Such questions are shaped by our history, and they reflect the complexity of the moral dilemmas you will face throughout your lives.

My hope is that you will engage such questions—and all those to follow—with the same compassion, commitment, and intellectual integrity you have brought to your studies here.

*George Chauncey is Professor in the Department of History and the College.*