

John McNeill



John McNeill's landmark 1976 book, *The Church and the Homosexual*, was the first theological work written by a Catholic priest to dispute the church's official prohibition of homosexual activity and relationships. John was a Jesuit priest at the time he published the book. He was also a licensed psychotherapist who also held a doctorate in theology. The book contained arguments from both the human sciences and the Catholic scholarly tradition to demonstrate that the prohibition was pastorally harmful and theologically incorrect.

Arthur Warner was adept at spotting talent that could be used in his quest to decriminalize consenting adult sex in all 50 states. When he became aware of John's amazing book, he invited John to join the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties. Since religious prohibitions had been used as a major underpinning for sodomy laws in the United States, having a Catholic theologian participate in the law reform efforts would be helpful to the cause. John gladly accepted the invitation.

John was born in Buffalo, New York, on September 2, 1925. He became a priest in 1959 and was transformed into a national figure when, some 17 years later, he announced that he was gay during an interview with news anchor Tom Brokaw on a national television program.

John's journey from a humble priest to a Vatican outcast began in 1970 when he started ministering to lesbian and gay Catholics. Although he published *The Church and the Homosexual* with Vatican approval in 1976, church leaders soon had a change of heart when the book stirred controversial conversations among clergy and laity alike. John was directed to stop speaking publicly on sexual matters.

John went underground, so to speak, by quietly working with gays and lesbians. When the AIDS crisis hit New York, John and a Catholic chaplain with the New York Fire Department established an AIDS ministry in Harlem.

John's relationship with Church hierarchy reached a breaking point in 1986 when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger -- the future Pope Benedict -- co-authored a Vatican report titled "On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons." When John publicly criticized the harsh language in the document, Vatican officials ordered him to be quiet. John refused.

John was expelled from the Jesuits in 1987. That same year he was the grand marshal of New York City's gay pride parade.

Father John McNeill died in 2015 with his partner of 45 years, Charlie Chiarelli, at his bedside.