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[NEW ARCHBISHOP FOR S.F. - VIEWS - Tolerant statements toward gays - Homosexuals can minister as priests, Niederauer says](#)

San Francisco's incoming Catholic archbishop, George Niederauer, has spoken boldly in support of gay priests and has praised gay parishioners, leaders of gay Catholic organizations said Thursday.

Many in the church hierarchy have blamed the international clergy sex abuse scandal on gay priests, and the Vatican's recent instruction on gays in the priesthood stated new rules on gay clergy were "made more urgent by the current situation."

Niederauer disputed those ideas in an interview with his diocesan newspaper in Utah.

"Some who are seriously mistaken have named sexual orientation as the cause of the recent scandal regarding the sexual abuse of minors by priests," Niederauer said in the interview with the Intermountain Catholic News, which was published Monday.

His reference to "sexual orientation" stands in contrast to the Vatican instruction's description of "persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies."

Niederauer said gay men committed to Christ and the church can effectively minister as priests, and he said sexual orientation was "a structure of human personality." In contrast, the Vatican instruction states that men "who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture' " are unfit for priesthood.

"I don't think there are any ifs, ands or buts that the Vatican is trying to blame the sex abuse crisis on gay priests, and this man says that is 'seriously mistaken,'" said Sam Sinnett, national president of DignityUSA, an organization in Washington, D.C., of gay and lesbian Catholics.

"Very few bishops have come out and said clearly that this is not about sexual orientation," Sinnett said. He added that, if the statements reflected the bishop's thinking, his appointment in San Francisco would be "more than a small step forward for gay and lesbian Catholics."

As archbishop, Niederauer will have a central role in determining who is ordained in San Francisco, Marin and San Mateo, the counties included in the San Francisco diocese.

In 10 years as bishop of the Diocese of Salt Lake City, Niederauer rarely had to address gay and lesbian issues in the church. DignityUSA, which has chapters in 24 states, isn't active in Utah.

In 2004, however, Niederauer publicly opposed a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage that appeared on the Utah state ballot, even though he opposed same-sex marriage.

Many Protestant leaders and the powerful Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints supported the ban. But Niederauer said he was troubled that the amendment banned any union

beside marriage. He also saw the ban as unnecessary because same-sex marriages already were prohibited by Utah law.

Niederauer also helped form the "Coalition of Concerned Religious Leaders," a group of Utah clergy who urged tolerance for gays and lesbians after the state legislature in 1996 banned gay student clubs when students at one school expressed interest in starting such a club.

Before he was assigned to Utah, Niederauer spent his career in Southern California, including a stint at a parish in West Hollywood, which has a large gay population. In a 2003 interview with the (Salt Lake City) Deseret News about his work in West Hollywood, he was enthusiastic.

"I don't have to take a back seat to anyone in the church in my admiration for the people I met," Niederauer said. He added, "They were as wonderful and gifted and generous and compassionate as any you meet."

Francis DeBernardo, who leads New Ways Ministry, a national advocacy group for gay and lesbian Catholics, and met with Niederauer in Salt Lake City, said the bishop was genuinely interested in reaching out to the gay and lesbian community.

"With his pastoral experience in an overwhelmingly gay Catholic parish in West Hollywood, and his political experience dealing with extremism from anti-gay forces in Utah, I think that Bishop Niederauer is one of the best candidates to lead the heavily gay-populated Catholic community of San Francisco," DeBernardo said.

Niederauer's predecessor, Archbishop William Levada, received mixed reviews from gay and lesbian Catholics. Levada spoke several times at the Most Holy Redeemer Church, a largely gay parish in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, and appointed gays and lesbians to important positions in the diocese.

But on Levada's watch, the diocese stopped its ministry specifically for gay and lesbian Catholics and left that work to local parishes, said the Rev. Jim Schexnayder, who founded the Berkeley-based National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries. Schexnayder said he hoped Niederauer would revive that ministry.

"There's a great need obviously in San Francisco, with so many gay and lesbian Catholics who would greatly benefit from a public pastoral outreach," Schexnayder said.