

Once a Victim, A Priest Wants Zero Tolerance

By SARA RIMER
Published: June 12, 2002

LOUISVILLE, Ky., June 11— Some boys love baseball. Gary R. Hayes loved church.

"The church was everything," he said, remembering back 40 years to the yellow brick church of his childhood, St. Mary Magdalene in Camden, N.J. "The church was how you got close to God -- saying Mass, singing in the choir, cleaning the church, helping the nuns. If you wanted to get close to God, you got close to a nun or a priest."

The church "was where I felt safe," he said.

He was 15, he said, when two priests began getting him drunk and sexually abusing him. He had wanted to become a priest since he was a little boy, and so he kept silent, he said, for fear the priests would get angry and keep him from his goal.

He did become a priest, but eventually he also became the president of a victims' group. "Some of these guys cooperate more with evil than they do with God," Father Hayes, 49, who is the pastor of two small parishes in western Kentucky, said of his abusers and of those church leaders who covered up the abuse.

Three hundred of the nation's Catholic bishops are going to Dallas on Wednesday to try to end a sexual abuse crisis by adopting a policy to handle abusive priests. But victims like Father Hayes, who will meet with a group of bishops there, want far stronger measures than those included in a draft document drawn up by a committee of bishops. That proposal, while adopting a zero-tolerance standard on new cases of sexual abuse, would allow bishops discretion to decide whether a priest who sexually abused a minor on one occasion years ago is fit for service.

Father Hayes, who heads a group called LinkUp, and the leaders of a second victims' group want the removal of all known sex offenders from the priesthood, with no second chances.

While the proposal by the bishops' committee makes no mention of punishment for church officials who may have covered up abuse or transferred offending priests from parish to parish, these victims' groups want the removal of any church leader who has moved around or helped a priest who was a sex offender.

Father Hayes says he does not expect the bishops to agree to these proposals. "I don't know who they are anymore," he said, talking over lunch at a restaurant in Louisville on Monday, on the eve of his departure for Dallas. "I don't think they belong to the same church as I do."

The Dallas meeting comes as Bishop J. Kendrick Williams of Lexington, Ky., resigned today because of sexual abuse accusations.

"It's terribly sad," Father Hayes said of the resignation.

When most people hear his story, they want to know how he could still want to be a priest after what priests had done to him. For Father Hayes, though, who was one of six children of a man who printed labels for a fruit company, there was never a question of becoming anything else. The abuse, he said, "had nothing to do with Jesus Christ."

FACEBOOK
TWITTER
GOOGLE+
EMAIL
SHARE
PRINT
REPRINTS



MOST EMAILED

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU



1. Pope Francis Sets Guidelines for Removing Bishops Who Mishandle Sex Abuse Cases



2. BERGA JOURNAL Medieval Festival in Rebellious Catalonia Takes on Modern Meaning



3. Scapegoat or Spy? Vatican Consultant Commands Attention at Leaks Trial



4. WINES OF THE TIMES Revisiting Godello, a Grape That Spain Has Rescued



5. Poland Revives Effort to Extradite Roman Polanski



6. Japanese Boy, 7, Left on Mountain by Parents Is Found Alive



7. Zoo's Killing of Gorilla Holding a Boy Prompts Outrage



8. Video: Finally Saying Farewell



9. A Nearly 12-Year-Long Vigil Ends, and a Massachusetts Church Closes



10. FRANK BRUNI Penne and Prejudice

Log in to discover more articles based on what you've read.

Log In Register Now

What's This? | Don't Show

Still, it has taken years of therapy, for Father Hayes to stop blaming himself for what happened. The abuse went on for two years, he said. He entered the seminary in upstate New York as a deeply troubled young man who drank too much, and he defied the authority of seminary officials at every turn.

During a session with a psychologist at the seminary, who was also a priest, he revealed the source of his pain for the first time.

"At the next session, I started telling him about the abuse again," Father Hayes said. "He said, 'You told me that last week. Let's move on.' "

"It makes me angry now," he said. "At the time, I tried to appreciate that maybe he was trying to give me good advice."

So he said nothing, and tried to move on.

There are many more priests like Father Hayes who have been abused, but who have not spoken out, said A. W. Richard Sipe, a former priest and psychotherapist who has written about abuse in the church.

"He's an authentic whistle-blower," Mr. Sipe said of Father Hayes. "The challenge for these people is that they're victims, plus they're members of the system. They have to have a lot of courage, belief in themselves, belief in the foundation of the system rather than the people."

In 1986, with his father dying of cancer, Father Hayes, who had been working as a pastoral associate in upstate New York, returned to Camden in hopes of becoming a priest there. "I had this idea I would go to the diocese and work this thing out," he said. "I wanted to tell the truth."

He met with diocese vocation officials and told them he had been abused by two priests, Joseph H. McGarvey and William C. O'Connell.

The vocation director outlined the charges in an internal memorandum in 1986, but no action was taken against the priests. Father McGarvey was given a promotion and transferred to another parish. Not long afterward, Father O'Connell resigned from the priesthood, and was convicted of sexually assaulting three boys in Bristol, R.I., where he had moved. He has since died.

The diocese suggested Father Hayes go elsewhere to become a priest because of his "negative experiences in the diocese and from priests who are still functioning," according to the internal memorandum, which was later obtained by The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Father Hayes went to Kentucky, where he was ordained in 1990. About a year later, he went to his first meeting of SNAP -- Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests -- at a Holiday Inn outside Chicago.

"It changed my life," he said. "I came back determined to get my perpetrator out."

With the support of the Owensboro, Ky., bishop, John J. McRaith, Father Hayes went to Camden to meet with Bishop James T. McHugh. "He said there would be an investigation, and that he would communicate with me about it," Father Hayes said.

When months passed with no word from the bishop, Father Hayes, along with two other men who said they had been victims of the two priests, filed a lawsuit against the Camden diocese. The lawsuit was settled out of court. Father McGarvey, who denied the abuse, retired.

From his vantage point, Father Hayes sees the culture of the church as a part of the problem. "The male-dominated hierarchy, they come from a place where you don't challenge their authority," he said. "It's the unspoken rule of not saying anything bad about another priest."



"I really don't get angry at the guys who perpetrate," Father Hayes added. "I'm much angrier at the bishops and chancery officials who put them in harm's way."

As for his own bishop, John McRaith, Father Hayes says he has been nothing but supportive. In a telephone interview today, Bishop McRaith, who is also headed for Dallas, called Father Hayes "a good priest."

"I certainly supported him in bringing closure to that painful part of his life," Bishop McRaith said.

Father Hayes's dream now is to build a retreat for people abused by priests. He is trying to raise \$500,000 to buy the land -- 75 acres in western Kentucky. "It's hard for a lot of survivors to even walk into a church," he said. "This is a place where they can reconnect with God."

Photo: The Rev. Gary R. Hayes at Cathedral Santuario de Guadalupe in downtown Dallas, where the nation's Catholic bishops will meet today. (Mark Graham for The New York Times)(pg. A22)

[FACEBOOK](#) [TWITTER](#) [GOOGLE+](#) [EMAIL](#) [SHARE](#)