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Cover story

Sr. Jane Kelly: She broke rules of the clerical club

By ARTHUR JONES
Healdsburg, Calif.

Sr. Jane Kelly has become by default what the diocese lacked: a repository of trust for many Santa Rosa Catholics. She has paid a high price -- the silence and lack of support of some priests she's known for decades. She broke the code of the clerical club.

The sometimes acerbic 50-year member of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary community, religious education director in Ukiah for almost 28 years, said she isn't leaving. "I've opened a Plowshares community dining room for the poor and homeless. So that's why I'm staying." She now considers herself semi-retired.

She carries around with her the confidences, the details, people bring to her: accounts of clerical financial misdeeds and additional accusations of clerical sexual abuse. "Talk about Watergate!" she said.

At the February Ukiah town meeting, she was photographed holding her finger up as she met San Francisco Archbishop William Levada. "I'd written him a four-page letter. I said, 'I sent you a letter and named these [three] priests.' He said, 'I didn't get back to you. But don't worry, I'm taking care of it.' If I hear that one more time ..." she said.

She can be disconcertingly direct. "Can you believe this? Can you believe this?" she repeated, when telling NCR of other abuse case situations she tried to bring to the church's attention, when priests shared her suspicions and did nothing. "See the m.o. [modus operandi]?" she asked. She describes instances of hypocrisy, of confronted priests giving "academy award" performances, though her more penetratingly wry asides cannot be repeated.

She says she's looked church officials in the eye and watched them lie

to her without blinking.

Serving as a voice for the aggrieved has brought Kelly lay support, however, generally expressed in letters to the editor in the Santa Rosa and Ukiah newspapers. The latest, a lengthy open letter to Levada from Ukiah lawyer and Catholic parishioner, Thomas F. Johnson, (Ukiah Daily Journal, Feb. 16) asked: “Why don’t you publicly thank Sister Jane? Without her this mess would never have come to light. You should be ever grateful to her, yet it looks as though she is being treated like a traitor.”

Obviously, in some circles, she’s not popular because of what she knows and is perhaps even feared for what she’s set in motion. But it’s not a situation she wants or relishes. She ended up with the information originally because the institution lacked avenues of accountability. The result of an unresponsive institution is that now it also lacks credibility.

“What’s a virgin nun to do?” she wisecracked.

Then she answered. “I’d do it all over again. [The alternative] is more detrimental to the church and the faithful.” She allowed herself a rare smile.

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