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## Church in Crisis

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### Survivors connect to heal, raise voices

By JASON BERRY

*Mendham, N.J.*

On April 19, as 15 American bishops and cardinals began leaving for Rome to discuss the priest sex abuse crisis with Pope John Paul II, 38-year-old Mark Serrano went back to Mendham, N.J., a green, hilly suburb of New York City, to meet with eight other men whose childhood years had been plundered by Fr. Jim Hanley.

Serrano makes his home in Leesburg, Va., now. He has a successful business, a wife and children. But the memories of sexual assaults in childhood stalked him like a shadow in the sun. His parents, Lou and Pat, who live in the two-story home where they raised seven kids, joined other parents and friends of the Hanley survivors at the Black Horse Inn -- just across the street from St. Joseph's Parish, where a pedophile was pastor for a decade, starting in 1972. The survivors gathered for two days to sort through Hanley's impact on their lives. The priest, 65, no longer has clerical faculties; he lives on a church pension 30 miles away.

The bishops and cardinals meeting in Rome in April had never dreamed that a scandal dating to 1985 would explode into a crisis. A frail pope told them the priesthood held no room for those who abuse children, and left them to sort out details.

The prelates would return home and, in June in Dallas, under severe public pressure, adopt the zero-tolerance policy that is now the focus of negotiations with Vatican officials. Clearly, Rome was unprepared for the Americans to adopt norms with a democratic instrument: oversight. As the media focus on details of canon law and the need to protect the rights of priests, moral justice is still the central issue. Will the voices of abuse survivors fade into whispers as bishops, many of whom produced the darkest church scandal in centuries, emerge as the sole arbiters of reform?

### Like a cross upon the soul

For years, revelations about sexual crimes in the priesthood were driven by plaintiff lawyers who sued dioceses and gave documents to journalists. This year, amid a media chain reaction set off by *The Boston Globe*, the abuse survivors became figures in a public drama. Their voices, functioning like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, persuaded many ordinary Catholics that a moral order had been broken. Their testimony inspired Voice of the Faithful and countless others to ask themselves about the virtue of ecclesiastical authority. In a sense, the survivors' movement has made survivors of us all.

The gathering in New Jersey was a striking display of how a group of men, carrying mental imagery of sexual trauma like a cross upon the soul, gain spiritual strength in sharing their stories. The gathering was notable too because it culminated in a confrontation with the local bishop that held a mirror to the sound and fury of church-wide issues.

The Mendham gathering also included the pastor who succeeded Hanley. Msgr. Kenneth Lasch, a canon

lawyer, took a different response than most church authorities. In 1993 he arranged for three former altar boys of Hanley to meet with a detective in the sex crimes unit of the Morris County Prosecutor. The statute of limitations prevented a prosecution of Hanley; however, they filed civil suits against the Paterson, N.J., diocese.

As Lasch slowly learned the scope of Hanley's sexual crimes he encouraged other victims to confront the church. Lasch spoke openly with the press. He lived in the rectory where boys had been abused. "At times I felt as if my whole life was just keeping the parish intact because of what Hanley did," Lasch said in an interview.

Serrano settled his lawsuit in 1987 with the Paterson diocese. He broke the secrecy clause in a March 17 *New York Times* interview. Network producers began calling; he soon gave interviews to Connie Chung, Oprah Winfrey and on "Good Morning America." Then the real calls began.

A homeless man in nearby Morristown, N.J., called from his mother's, sobbing, telling Serrano how Hanley had abused him for years. Bill Crane called from Clackamas, Ore., saying: "I sat in my living room holding my wife's hand, watching television, and I heard my story come from your mouth." Other men called, connecting across the years.

As such scenes play out in small gatherings across the country, survivors, once ashamed of their secrets, are with their words forcing many Catholics to rewrite their assumptions of authority toward a hierarchy that sheltered sexual criminals.

The Mendham gathering was open to the press, save one afternoon session. As the talks began, David Clohessy, a founder of the Survivor Network of those Abused by Priests -- SNAP -- said: "In 12 years of working with survivors I think this is the first meeting anywhere of a large group victimized by the same priest."

"Each one of you is courageous," said Serrano. "I thank you for coming. So many of us have been trapped in silence. No more. Today is about healing, breaking silence. We've got to speak about the injustice that's in the church ... and find other victims of Jim Hanley so we can put him behind bars."

Hanley's process of sexual grooming began by showing each boy pornographic magazines, individually, advancing to other sex acts by wearing down their defenses. Said Serrano: "You read media coverage and hear a word like 'fondling.' People need to know details, the sensation of semen in my pants and having to flee from that rectory -- but not being able to tell my parents."

"At 11 years old, I weighed 45 pounds," said Bill Crane, now a strapping 6 feet tall. "Hanley said, 'You must be lifting weights.' ... I came from a close-knit family with six kids. Hanley made me feel like an only child. We all thought that we were alone." The priest "fell in love with me, absolutely."

Later, Crane elaborated in an interview. As a high school freshman, working part-time as a groundskeeper at St. Joseph's, he became interested in a girl. Hanley, who paid him for the work, became jealous. "Fornication is a sin!" fumed the priest.

## Dark moods

Billy Crane would sob in his room at night. His mother tried to comfort him, unable to understand his agony. In the summers Hanley took Crane to a house he rented at Point Pleasant on the Jersey Shore. In 1981 Hanley tried to induce him to perform oral sex and submit to anal sodomy, but he refused.

Over the next year Hanley's drinking worsened; his moods turned dark without warning. One night

Crane visited him. Fr. Jim was in boxer shorts, tanked on vodka, crying. “Billy, I love you,” he said. “I need to talk to the bishop. I need to move on.”

“You can’t leave!” the boy protested, crying himself.

In 1982, Hanley announced his departure from St. Joseph’s to detox. Parishioners held a huge going-away party to show affection. The boys were locked in secrecy.

With Hanley’s departure Billy Crane got scared. He thought Hanley would tell about the sex between them, that the police would approach him, and he would be publicly humiliated. He finished high school in a fog of confusion, joined the Navy and ended up on a base in Scotland. When he finally got the gumption to tell the chaplain, the priest told him not to tell others lest he scandalize the church. He started riding a bike, “putting in 500 miles a week to sedate myself so I could sleep at night.” Later he began sedating himself with alcohol; his wife finally got him into a recovery program.

His twin brother Tommy Crane kept mum for years. He, too, had been abused by the same priest. Eventually both men told the family.

“It’s like the whole community was anesthetized,” Tommy Crane told the survivor gathering. “God is supposed to be No. 1 in our lives. Who am I supposed to trust? We can talk about Hanley going to jail ... but what about our faith?”

“In my 20s,” said Serrano, “I couldn’t go to Mass without seeing the image of the priest and thinking of Hanley’s genitals. It angers me that I can’t take the good things of being a Catholic and share it with my kids.”

Tommy Crane recalled his pride at being an altar boy and being called out of class to assist at a funeral “as if you were on stage with him.”

Steve Holenstein, a 43-year-old network administrator, made his home in Lawrenceville, Ga. “What that man did permeates every level of your life,” he said of Hanley. “With your children, in the marital bed -- it’s a spiritual shipwreck. I remember that night when I’m lying in bed with him and his hands went into my pants and he’s whispering in my ear. I’ll remember that for the rest of my life ... I’m four years older than you guys. I wish I could have stopped him.”

Holenstein’s voice choked. “By the grace of God, I’m here.”

“I remember Sr. Janis talking about masturbation as a sin,” said Tommy Crane. “I raised my hand. ‘I heard it was OK.’ Next thing, I’m in the principal’s office. I’m suspended from school for two days.”

As the men spoke of coping with sexually graphic memories, Bill Crane said: “There’s a lot of power in unity. There’s a big difference between being wounded and being committed. We need to break down the walls of secrecy.”

Serrano was haunted with flashbacks long after his lawsuit. “We’d be on the phone with him two, three hours at a time,” his mother, Pat, said in an interview. “He was sobbing, the thoughts were so terrible to him. Finding the words was a terrible hurdle.” One of Mark’s sisters had held her wedding in another parish as Mark wouldn’t set foot in St. Joseph’s, their home parish.

At the gathering, Pat Serrano, eyes brimming, found words of her own: “It’s been a long, lonely 17 years. Sharing these stories helps us get on with our lives as religious people, as a faith-filled people. I knew you guys when you played in my pool. ... I’m proud of all you. I salute you for what you’ve done

and will accomplish.”

## Parish bonds

The mother’s words echoed a spirit of the town with close-knit neighborhoods and bonds formed through St. Joseph’s Parish. There was also the sad dignity of Lasch, listening to the stories of the sinned-against, making atonement for the church by his presence.

“When I came here I was thinking about me and my brother,” said Tommy Crane. “To all of you, I love you for being here.”

The Cranes, with six children, and the Serranos, with seven, were among the largest families in the parish. Pat and Lou Serrano remained active in St. Joseph’s. The Cranes moved to the Pacific Northwest and left the Catholic church.

“When I was a kid,” said Bill Crane, “I had to ride my bike eight miles a day to sedate myself so I could go to sleep. Today I got a part of my youth back.”

If the Mendham gathering was the largest of its kind, the voices echo a growing movement of solidarity felt among victims and other laypeople appalled at the dynamics of clerical governing.

On the other side of the country, Sarah Wilgress, 48, understands perfectly. She now works in publishing in Monterey, Calif.

At 16 she was seduced by Fr. Vincent Dwyer, a former Trappist monk famous for motivational lectures to priests. Dwyer had an institutional base, the Center for Human Development, at The Catholic University of America in Washington; he was also a popular retreat speaker. Dwyer was in his mid-40s when he met Wilgress, who had no siblings and lost her father to suicide when she was an infant. She was at Santa Catalina, a convent school in Monterey. He gave guest lectures. As the grooming process continued, he sent her 17 love letters on her 17th birthday. The on-and-off relationship lasted until she was 28.

“I really have gone through hell because of Dwyer. The worst of it, besides the spiritual assault, was that it disrupted my education. I truly loved being at Santa Catalina,” Wilgress told *NCR*.

“The perfectly tended gardens, the nuns, some of them busy throwing off their veils and shortening their habits per Vatican II, gliding about, forever trying to inculcate discipline -- personal, academic, social, spiritual. And I loved the fact that it was OK to study. One was not made fun of for being serious. Dwyer’s ravaging me the summer before my senior year left me completely confused and traumatized. In Dallas this summer, [plaintiffs’ attorney] Sylvia Demarest said she was struck by the degree of isolation with which clergy abuse victims live. I can certainly corroborate her observation. I said nothing to my close friends or classmates about what I had experienced. I had seen too much and been transported to a very dark place, and I did not want to contaminate anyone with awareness of what I knew on some deep level was evil. And so I stayed quiet, and ran away twice my senior year, thereby sabotaging plans for college. And I stayed quiet for 20 years thereafter.”

In 1981, shortly after Wilgress broke off the relationship, Dwyer, now retired and living in Florida, was becoming a player at St. Francis Seminary in San Diego. Mark Brooks, an ex-Marine, was at the seminary then. Two years later, at 29, he was expelled for protesting a hothouse environment between faculty and students. The diocese paid Brooks \$15,000 to go away. He did, but also wrote a 56-page account of his experiences and sent it to Pope John Paul II. In that report Brooks criticized Dwyer for encouraging seminarians “not to fear intimacy. [We] were urged to take the ‘risk’ to enter into such

friendship.”

In a 1987 interview with this writer, Dwyer said he had only meant “spiritual intimacy.” Calling Brooks unfit for seminary, he refused further comment.

In 1993 Wilgress contacted Brooks after reading a published account of his experience. In 1995, she negotiated a \$75,000 settlement from Dwyer’s order -- premised on her not speaking about it.

In 1998 Dwyer received the National Federation of Priests’ Councils President’s Award. “No one answers God’s call without wanting to change the world, to become a saint,” he said in his acceptance speech. “Only prayer keeps the dream alive” (*NCR*, May 15, 1998).

Wilgress learned about the award from a nun. “I felt sick, angry, and betrayed -- betrayed again on a very deep level, by the same institution. I also felt re-traumatized,” she says today.

Wilgress’ story is told in detail in the June 23 issue of *The Monterey County Herald*. A spokesman for the Trappists said a second suit brought by a man is pending against Dwyer. It was filed in Worcester, Mass., Superior Court. The spokesman said Dwyer requested separation from the order in 1999, when that allegation was brought.

The survivors’ movement has demanded that church officials release victims from “hush money” agreements. Silence, they argue, should be the survivor’s decision. Wilgress never contacted Dwyer’s superiors before speaking to reporters after survivors’ gatherings in Dallas when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops met in June.

Like Wilgress, Mark Brooks found his spiritual life a struggle to rewrite the meaning of faith. Recently, in an e-mail to a 32-year-old man who contacted a SNAP help line, Brooks said: “I am very sorry you have had to put up with sexual harassment from your parish priest. You said it began when you were about 16 up till now. That’s a long time to suffer in silence. Sexual harassment is a form of sexual abuse. ... The problem I saw in regard to personal conduct and behavior was one dealing with emotional maturity and what is often called psychosexual development. Combine that with unchallenged power, celibate or not, gay or straight -- well, I think you can paint a pretty grim picture of what follows. Is there a disproportionate number of gay priests? I am afraid the answer is yes. Is it a problem? I would have to say yes again.”

## **Manipulative, abusive**

“I am speaking from experience,” he continued, “and what I witnessed on a day-to-day basis as a seminarian. Were many of these priests sexually manipulative and abusive? I’m sorry to have to say yes again. I should point out that many of these priests often preyed upon young unsuspecting ‘gay’ seminarians who were sincere and devoted to their vocations. There are many victims of clergy abuse who are gay or who were exploited as they struggled with sexual maturation issues.”

The survivors are a redemption narrative, a journey from victimization to an identity as moral witnesses. With the pendulum in news coverage swinging between reports on bishops’ listening sessions with victims, and mainstream concerns for the rights of priests, a greater story is unfolding. The Catholic imagination is rewriting the terms of relationship to church authority.

In many locations, but particularly in the Northeast, branches of Voice of the Faithful, a group formed in Boston earlier this year, are springing up, often despite strong objections of the bishops.

Groups of diocesan priests in Boston and New York are advocating change in the kind of discussions

that would have been unthinkable a year ago.

In the case of Manchester, N.H., Bishop John B. McCormack, a protégé of Boston Cardinal Bernard Law who has been roundly criticized for his handling of a number of clergy accused of sexual abuse, lay unrest has led to a direct confrontation. According to a recent *New York Times* piece, “Parishioners in one church where the bishop said Mass urged him noisily to step down and accused him of lying about a pastor he assigned to their parish without disclosing the priest’s affair with a teenage boy.”

The bishop, according to the account, shouted back, “I’m not lying!”

In these haunting times, the resolution many thought had come in Dallas, the zero-tolerance policy, has provoked new debate and controversy. While victims’ groups thought they had finally gotten through to the bishops about the need to remove sex offenders from ministry, the norms, as they are called, hit a roadblock in Rome. The lay review boards called for in the charter are crucial to any reform agenda. Without oversight -- the role of laypeople -- many believe that bishops will fold back into a culture of governance, lacking measures to assure accountability.

## Clearing the ranks

The debate around zero tolerance shows the complexity of the issue. As the civil rights demonstrators a generation ago forced changes on a racially segregated South, so the survivors have forced the bishops to admit that they seriously harmed victims -- and the church -- by sheltering and recycling child molesters. But it was quite another step for the bishops to clean the ranks with genuine justice to all involved.

One objection that drew wide attention came from Conventual Franciscan Fr. Canice Connors in what many saw as a cynical speech to the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

“Have you framed a copy of the charter or taken bets on the odds of the norms winning Vatican recognition?” said Connors, the former CEO of St. Luke’s Institute, the hospital that treats clergy child molesters. Connors, who has been critical of bishops in the past for their insensitivity to victims, this time openly ridiculed the bishops’ attempts at reform.

“Are we having fun yet?” he asked the religious superiors.

Connors scoffed at the bishops’ sex abuse committee that “sat through extended pain-ridden narratives of victim suffering. The predictable outcome was a group paralyzed in remorse and shame. No patience for the narrative of recovery and reconciliation. ... Zero tolerance is a war slogan, a mobilization of absolutes, the creation of an objective disorder from which there is no escape.”

Connors’ solution? “Pastoral programs that will attend to both victim and abuser guided by principles of justice and reconciliation.” On paper, that’s the position that the bishops had for years.

Criticism of the norms, however, has come from unexpected quarters. Fr. Thomas Doyle, now a military chaplain, sacrificed a promising career track in the church for openly opposing the bishops’ handling of the crisis. Doyle, as canon lawyer at the Vatican nunciature in Washington in 1985, co-authored a 100-page report assessing the crisis with prophetic warnings. Doyle, one of the most ardent supporters of victims of sexual abuse by clergy, said in an e-mail: “I am not surprised at all that the norms were sent back. From a legal standpoint they were weak, ambiguous and held real potential for worse abuses in the future.

“We are in this mess because the bishops made up their own rules and totally disregarded procedural

law in dealing with complaints of sex abuse in the past,” he continued. “The proposed norms amount to another radical departure from procedural law. They would have allowed the bishops to subjectively decide what is and what isn’t sexual abuse. The summary procedure in the fifth norm, the so-called ‘one strike’ norm, has an agenda that is only thinly veiled. It promotes continued secrecy and a totally subjective process which would again freeze out any real involvement for the victims.”

Doyle said he believes the norms, if passed as presented in Dallas, would allow the bishops to “return to complacency, thinking that they had done all they needed to do. It’s not enough to kick out every cleric suspected of a sexually related offense. The real issue is the bishops’ role in the whole scandal. Why have they been allowed to stonewall, cover up, manipulate, re-victimize, lie? Their essential role in the whole mess has never been studied nor even acknowledged by the Vatican nor the bishops themselves.”

Most analysts of the crisis, conservative or liberal, agree that the missing link is a mechanism for accountability of bishops for their role in the scandal. The meeting in New Jersey ended with a dramatic encounter that trained a lens on decay in the church’s governing system, even with a bishop who agreed to meet with angry survivors.

Bishop Frank Rodimer of the Paterson diocese attended the final session and heard the stories of the survivors. Rodimer had removed Hanley as a working priest but did not report him to police.

## **Bishop in the beach house**

For many years Rodimer rented a beach house in Ocean County on the New Jersey shore with a priest from Camden, Peter Osinski. They sometimes invited guests. One of Osinski’s guests, starting in 1984, was a young boy whose parents he had befriended. The boy came often without his parents, visiting during summers for the next 12 years. Osinski slept down the hall from the bishop. The boy grew up and filed charges. Osinski went to prison. On Aug. 22, 2000, Osinski answered questions at the prison for a civil suit brought by the victim. “Was Bishop Rodimer aware that you and [the boy] were sleeping in the same room?” an attorney asked.

“No,” said Osinski.

“Why not?”

“As far as I know, Bishop Rodimer, you know, didn’t know. Why didn’t he know, I don’t know, but he never -- you know, he never brought it up.”

The victim sued Rodimer for his alleged role in failing to take protective measures against Osinski. The bishop paid an out-of-court settlement of \$250,000 for his role in the case, using funds from the Paterson diocese.

Against this backdrop, the bishop, who recently retired, entered a conference room at St. Joseph Parish center at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, April 20, to a bevy of TV cameras and a dozen reporters besides the survivors’ group. Rodimer, portly with silver hair, had blue eyes full of caution. He sat opposite eight of the men. A poster showed photographs of them as boys. In a back row, Lasch sat with Serrano’s parents.

Mark Serrano handed Rodimer a list of typed questions and thanked him for coming. Serrano had reported Hanley to the bishop in the mid-’80s while he was a Notre Dame undergraduate. Now, he pointed to photographs of the survivors as boys. “Seventeen years ago I came to you as a young man. You were the highest authority I knew. You told me Fr. Hanley apologized and wouldn’t endanger anyone and you had to take him at his word. ... Hanley damaged the innocence that you see on that board.”

Rodimer was part of a hierarchy getting clobbered in the news media. He had recycled other priest perpetrators and publicly apologized. Now, lips pursed, Rodimer gazed into the media lights and the survivors' anger.

"We formed a union to break the silence," Serrano continued. "Justice means truth and openness. Unlock your vaults, release the files and documents on these cases."

Rodimer's brow furrowed.

"My name is Tom Kelly," said another man. "Fr. Hanley stole my childhood."

"I will never set foot in a Catholic church again," said Steve Holenstein, voice cracking.

"Frank," said Tom Crane, to the bishop, his voice dripping scorn. "He's a pedophile collecting a pension and he took away my faith."

### **'You're responsible'**

Rodimer nodded, grimacing.

"You're responsible," continued Tom Crane. "What are you going to do about it?" Crane pointed to a photograph of a sweet-faced kid. "That's me."

Mark Serrano cut in. "The clergy have been protected! Peter Osinski was your friend. You knew about pedophiles! That man had sex with that child under your roof!"

Rodimer's face flushed red.

"A fellow living in a concrete conduit, a homeless man, was destroyed as a direct result of James Hanley," said Steve Holenstein.

Rodimer nodded. Affluent Morristown has few homeless people.

"He was not able to get here today," continued Holenstein. "Most of us have been able to maintain jobs and family. ... I hope you don't forget that fellow because ultimately you are responsible."

"Hanley is a pedophile," said Tom Crane. "You think there is a cure?"

"I don't know," said the bishop. "I don't think ..."

"You have the power, Frank, to do something before you retire. This man belongs behind bars."

The bishop frowned. "What are you proposing?"

"Your question troubles me," said Serrano. "Where is your moral indignation?"

"Then I don't get it," said Rodimer. "What do you want?"

Groans went up around the room.

Serrano demanded that Rodimer publish a photograph of Hanley in the diocesan newspaper with the words: "Wanted, Recent Victims of Jim Hanley."

The room erupted in applause.

“I don’t have the right to put him behind bars,” said Rodimer.

To more groans, Rodimer responded: “I’ve never had to go through anything like this. When I read your account in *The New York Times*, Mark, I felt sick. I can understand your reactions. I knew this was going to be tough. I’ve got a thousand different emotions. . . . I’m approaching the age of retirement. I do know in the time given to me I will use it to make sure what happened to you won’t happen to others.”

Serrano asked if he would go to St. Christopher’s, the first parish where Hanley molested a child, and offer help to any victims who come forward.

“Yes,” said Rodimer.

Serrano asked, “Have you ever tried to reach the victim of Peter Osinski?”

“I can’t discuss that,” the bishop said flatly.

As he stood to leave, Rodimer told David Clohessy that he wanted “to learn more about your work” with SNAP.

“Seek out survivors!” said Mark Serrano.

“I will try,” said Rodimer. “Thank you.”

The session had lasted 45 minutes.

As the group stepped outside into a chilly spring twilight, everyone was frustrated at Rodimer’s responses. Before the bishops met in Dallas, Rodimer announced that he would personally repay the \$250,000 to the Paterson diocese for his role in the lawsuit involving the imprisoned Osinski.

As the bishops’ representatives once again meet with their Vatican counterparts to negotiate a resolution to this crisis, the overarching issues remain in doubt: What is the price of moral justice in the church?

*Jason Berry, author of Lead Us Not into Temptation, is working with Gerald Renner on a book about the Vatican and the American church.*

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