Culture



by Heidi Schlumpf

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November 22, 2017
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Donna Provencher grew up in a strict, conservative Catholic home, where she was homeschooled, and later attended Christendom College in Virginia, popular among traditionalist Catholics. But as a young adult, turned off by those rigid, narrow definitions of Catholicism, she left the church and became a self-described agnostic.

This fall, she discovered Sick Pilgrim, a blog and online community of like-minded Catholics — including many in the arts — who struggle with faith and spirituality but who are attracted to the church. The blog describes Sick Pilgrim as “a field hospital for wayfaring souls” and “a space for the spiritually sick.”

But Provencher believes her honesty about her own struggles — including depression and anxiety, a recent divorce and a past rape — made her attractive to one of the co-moderators, Jonathan Ryan, who is now being accused of predatory actions towards at least eight women from the blog and community. (Although he writes under the name Jonathan Ryan, his legal name is Jonathan Ryan Weyer.)

The stories of the women who have been willing to speak publicly — including Sick Pilgrim co-moderator Jessica Mesman Griffith, Provencher and one woman who remains anonymous — have been posted online on various blogs. They include

allegations of nonconsensual touching and relationships that were “inappropriate, predatory and exploitative,” according to a statement from Griffith.

In response, Sick Pilgrim’s editorial board removed Ryan from the group on Nov. 14 and Griffith contacted Loyola Press, which ceased publication of Griffith’s and Ryan’s co-authored book, Strange Journey: How Two Homesick Pilgrims Stumbled Back into the Catholic Church, which was to be released in February.

Ryan, who was employed as a pastoral associate of evangelization at St. Alphonsus Liguori Parish in Zionsville, Indiana, also had been removed from the parish staff list on the its website as of Nov. 20. Two days later, a parish secretary confirmed to NCR that he no longer worked there.

In a statement shared with NCR Nov. 20, Ryan denied Griffith’s charges of sexual assault and said he believed the contact was “motivated by mutual desire.” Griffith said she was intoxicated after drinking with Ryan and the pastor of St. Alphonsus Liguori, who was there to do a house blessing. She also had shared with both men that she had just learned her husband had asked for a divorce.

“I couldn’t give consent because I had had too much drink,” Griffith told NCR. “He knew I was in a distraught and emotional state.”

A podcast the two recorded that evening — which Griffith said she doesn’t remember — never aired, because it was a “drunken mess,” Griffith said.

Ryan said in a statement that he “recognize[s] now that [Griffith’s] emotional state at the time made her eventually view this experience in a negative light,” adding that he “should have read the emotional landscape in much better fashion.”

Griffith initially stayed silent about the incident, which happened in August, but later came forward in November when the editorial board sensed a pattern of women getting romantically involved with Ryan and abruptly leaving the group. “There were red flags, but I didn’t trust my gut,” Griffith said. “And I didn’t tell anyone [about her experience with Ryan] because I was horrified and ashamed.”

Griffith met Ryan when he was an acquisitions editor at Ave Maria Press in South Bend, Indiana. He previously was a Presbyterian minister and has written two supernatural thrillers.

Although Griffith and Ryan were colleagues, Provencher believes Ryan was in a position of spiritual authority in the group and over her. As co-moderator, he was seen as “someone who was trustworthy on spiritual matters,” Provencher told NCR.

Ryan and Provencher became romantically involved after meeting through Sick Pilgrim, although the two lived in different states. Within weeks and after discussions of marriage, Provencher traveled to Indiana, where the relationship became sexual, she said. Ryan ended the relationship after Provencher returned home, and was dishonest about his sexual history and possibly other women he was concurrently involved with, she said.

In his statement, Ryan denies any “allegations of any sort of sexual abuse, predatory behavior, harassment, coercion or exploitation in any of the other stories present in the Internet,” but asks for forgiveness for hurting women. “I did not intend to mislead, but I did anyway,” he said in the statement.

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Provencher and other Catholic commentators have praised Sick Pilgrim's other leaders for their quick, proactive and “pro-victim” response to the allegations.

“Honestly, I was so impressed,” said Provencher, who had not shared her story until approached by the Sick Pilgrim board, in part because of fears she would not be believed. The board’s “swift and decisive action” has been “enormously transformative and healing for me,” she said.

Another member of the Sick Pilgrim community praised what she saw as “a preferential option for the victim."

“They handled it in a just and empathic way, with an emphasis on protecting the victims,” said Rebecca Bratten Weiss. “Instead of damaging their ‘brand,’ their response in fact confirms the value of a community like this and sets an example others should follow.”

Ryan said that he, too, is a victim, as he was molested by an older boy when he was a child but wants “to get better so I can stop causing emotional damage,” even as he “fully own[s] the emotional devastation I’ve caused.”

“Thus, I am putting myself under professional care and spiritual guidance to help me understand how I landed in this mess and caused so much emotional damage. And even more importantly, see how I can avoid this in the future,” Ryan said in his statement.

Griffith, who has not yet decided whether to continue with Sick Pilgrim, said she is not seeking revenge. “I just want to protect it from happening to other women,” she said.

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]