News



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In a week when Christians recall Jesus' passion and death, the homilist at a funeral for Fr. Gary Hayes, a victim of clergy abuse, declared that "Jesus himself was a victim of sexual abuse."

Fr. John Bambrick was referring to theologian Rocío Figueroa's recently published study that followed a research project she did with theologian David Tombs called "When Did I See you Naked"?, a work that Hayes would have loved, said the homilist. Hayes died of cancer April 4. He was 66.

Bambrick told assembled mourners that Figueroa had proven in her writing that Jesus had been sexually humiliated during his passion and crucifixion. He noted that three times in Gospel accounts of his ordeal, Jesus is forced to strip naked in front of cohorts of soldiers. Figueroa "makes the point that there are different forms of sexual abuse including sexual humiliation in the form of forced nudity, mockery, stripping, touching, sexual assault and other physical acts."

The reality is that the Romans crucified people naked, including Jesus. "The problem is that the Church has never faced the reality of sexuality in a healthy way and if they are not able to also see the sexuality of Jesus, the sexuality of human beings, they are not able to see the perversion that is sexual abuse," the homilist said,

quoting Figuerosa.

Bambrick knew this kind of humiliation for a fact. He and Hayes had endured sexual assault as adolescents. The two men shared an unusual bond over decades. Both were priests who had been sexually abused by priests when they were teenagers. They confided to each other the details of their painful past. "My abuse was bad, but Gary's was horrendous," Bambrick told his family and friends. The fact that he survived it is a testament to his resiliency and the miracle of his life," said Bambrick, who is pastor of St. Aloysius Church in Jackson, New Jersey. He is a member of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests and is a founding member of both Jordon's Crossing and Catholic Whistleblowers. He is a board member of New Jersey Child Assault Prevention, and, in 2002, he testified before the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

When asked years before by reporters how he could become and remain a priest after he had been violated by two Catholic priests, Hayes replied: "God didn't do this; man did." Understanding the difference, Bambrick said, helped Hayes become a compassionate listener for the abused and troubled, a whistleblower and advocate for ridding the church of its abusive priests and a founder of support groups for priests who were abused as children by priests. Jordan's Crossing and Victims of Clergy Abuse Linkup were two of the support networks Hayes and Bambrick worked on together.

Hayes was among 25 survivors of clergy sex abuse and their supporters who sat in a closed circle with four cardinals and St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop Harry Flynn at a meeting of U.S. bishops in Dallas in June 2002. Hayes was not afraid to tell the assembled eminences — Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia, William Keeler of Baltimore, Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C. and Flynn — that their draft document on protecting children from predatory clergy was "totally inadequate."

Hayes and other survivors addressing the Dallas meeting sought action, not policy papers; they wanted sexually abusing priests drummed out of the church. Hayes did not accept that the six months of daily therapy abuser priests were given would rid them of their disorder, nor did he want bishops to appoint survivors a therapist through their Catholic Charities organizations, as was the norm in most sees then.

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Hayes became a major figure in the survivor movement in June 1993 when he sued church officials over alleged childhood sexual molestation by a clergyman. Two of his childhood friends from his hometown of Millville, New Jersey, joined him in the lawsuit, as did the two men's parents. All three men said they had been sexually abused by the same two priests in their youth.

Hayes became the first priest ever to sue church officials over sex abuse charges and the first to file his class-action suit under federal racketeering (RICO) statutes used to prosecute organized crime. The men claimed they had often been transported across state lines by their abusers "for the express purpose of having forcible sexual contact with the then-minor plaintiffs."

The lawsuit, which was settled out of court in October 1993, named the dioceses of Camden, New Jersey, and of Providence, Rhode Island, where the two alleged abuser priests lived and worked. It also brought charges against the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and several church officials in the Northeast, contending that bishops had destroyed documentation of the abuse and threatened the teens to keep them silent when they first reported the molestation.

For his candor, Hayes said he had been expelled from the Camden Diocese but had found refuge in the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, where he served a number of rural parishes, had a host of friends and a good relationship with Owensboro's Bishop John McRaith.

As his cancer worsened, Hayes chose to come home to Millville and die among family and friends. He is survived by three brothers, a sister, an aunt and many nieces, nephews and cousins.

In an interview given jointly by Hayes and Bambrick, Hayes was asked what he hoped his legacy would be. The priest referred to a prayer that begins: "Lord, let me be a holy disturbance."

"I think he fulfilled it," Bambrick said of his long-time friend.

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime NCR contributor.]