

Lives of quiet and not-so-quiet desperation

Jamie Manson | Jun. 4, 2009

Seven years after the crisis first broke, the Catholic church's sex abuse scandal finally hit home for me.

It came with a call from my mother, who told me that a priest from my childhood, Fr. Brian McKeon, was dead. It had made the local television news.

"Did you know that he was one of Long Island's most notorious priest-pedophiles?" my mother asked. She began to quickly recount the details of his crimes and his death, all of which were too grim for me to process. Fr. Brian was among several Long Island priests sued for molesting at least six teenage boys. He struggled for decades with alcoholism, and sometimes drank with the teens. There is a particularly dark story about one of his victim's committing suicide. Fr. Brian presided at the funeral, and provided comfort -- and then subsequently abuse to the victim's younger brother. He was moved from parish to parish until the bishop laicized him in 2003, after a parent had placed fliers, stating that he was a pedophile, on 100 cars in a parking lot.

At some point thereafter, Brian moved to Florida and, at the time of his death, was an unemployed nurse. He died at home after suffering several seizures and coughing up blood. His roommate said that he refused medical assistance, and they blamed the seizures on the effects of years of alcohol abuse.

The ironic thing about Brian is that he is one of the only priests with whom I've ever had a positive experience.

When I was 13, my father moved to Arizona. My parents had divorced when I was three years old, and, with the exception of a few trips to Florida, I only saw my father every other Sunday. These were not great conditions for forming a deep father-daughter bond, so I was surprised by how much I missed him when my Catholic grammar school hosted a "father-daughter dance." I was new to the school, and my small eighth grade class had six girls. They all had fathers who, remarkably, were still married to their mothers.

Brian was the new priest at the school's parish. He was young and kind and accessible. I remember trying to find the courage to ask him if he would be willing to accompany me to the dance. I was a very broken adolescent, struggling with depression and mounting abandonment issues. I was convinced he would say no.

To my surprise, he warmly accepted my invitation. I still have fond memories and a very sweet photo of that evening. Nothing even remotely untoward happened (it turns out that Brian had only a penchant for teenage boys) and in my years of knowing him, I never heard any rumors. He did host a few "boys only" field trips, which raised my mother's eyebrows. But all of my recollections of him are good, even one particularly poignant story he told our class about his brother's suicide. His brother was married with small children. Unable to manage his addictions and mounting debt, he jumped in front of a Long Island Rail Road train. That story always remained in my memory, and takes on an even more tragic meaning in the wake of Brian's death.

Amid the many difficult stories circulating on the Internet about the harm that Brian did to many teenage boys, there are also many stories about his charisma, compassion, and spirituality. Several stories recount that he had a "Jekyll and Hyde" personality: when he was sober, he was a great spiritual friend and leader, but when he

drank, his "dark side" would quickly emerge. There is no doubt that he was deeply gifted. But, like so many highly-educated and successful individuals I've known, he led a life of quiet desperation. And, in collusion with the church hierarchy, he was forced to stay silent, to be dishonest about his illnesses and pain. There was profound brokenness underneath the abuse.

Brian's story hits me particularly hard at this point in my life because I work with so many men like him: out of control alcoholics and drug addicts, criminals of all sorts, sufferers of depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder who can only manage their diseases through chemical dependency. In many cases, these circumstances are the cause of their homelessness. They have burned their bridges everywhere else and come to our homeless outreach program because they know that they will still be welcomed with hospitality and warmth. Many of them are among the brightest, most creative, and insightful individuals I'll ever have the honor of meeting. As challenging as the work can be, one of the paradoxical joys that I receive in this ministry comes from the honesty that our men and women have about their brokenness, their addictions, and their despair. They lead lives of not-so-quiet desperation. In fact, some of them are living-out-loud! I can't help but find their authenticity courageous, comforting, and deeply life-giving.

Those who come to us seeking mercy, kindness, and generosity, come from a very broken, often empty, place. In order to be truly present to the person's suffering, the caregiver must be able to face and embrace her or his own pain. It is no coincidence that those who do any kind of outreach work with the most presence are those who are most in touch with their own brokenness. This meeting of vulnerabilities creates the conditions for a healing relationship to form -- a relationship that helps the person in need to transform from a place of fragmentation to a state of wholeness.

The ability to be honest about woundedness is, for me, what is so sorely lacking in my experience with the church. Even when these crises make front page headlines, church authorities still cannot admit that the Body of Christ is deeply broken, nearly shattered. This is ironic, since our faith is founded and centered on a God who continually made Godself vulnerable: first in the incarnation, by taking on human flesh and experiencing human life in all of its pain, sorrow, and joy; then in the crucifixion, where the very incarnation of God is subject to humiliation, torture, and a degrading death.

If the church leaders had found the courage to engage Brian's struggles with alcoholism and abuse with integrity and genuine presence to his pain, would he have died in a pool of blood, on his apartment floor, far from home? How many families and teenagers could have been spared deep harm and psychological distress if the hierarchy had demonstrated such courage and vulnerability? Was it not a Gospel imperative to care for him and to try to heal him, rather than taking the expeditious route of laicizing him and sending away, completely alone?

The church's radically inadequate responses to these crises will continue to mount until it finds the courage to admit its own brokenness and to cease resisting its profound vulnerability. It can learn a lot from the men and women who sleep on their steps and beg at their doors and attend Twelve-Step meetings in their basements. Below the surface of silence and desperation, waits a crucified God who longs to meet us in the broken places, touch our wounds, and walk with us to a fuller, more authentic life.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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