

TELEVISION REVIEW

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Pain of abuse lingers in vivid 'Twist'

By Matthew Gilbert, Globe Staff | June 28, 2005

There's something ordinary and familiar about the sexual abuse scenario in the HBO documentary "Twist of Faith." A Toledo priest takes boys to his lakeside cottage for weekends of spiritual guidance, plies them with booze and adult freedoms, and inflicts himself on them at night. The next day, and the next month, and the next year, the boys block out the pain and the shame; decades later, of course, the pain and the shame erupt.

It's the classic story we've been hearing in the news for years now, and, from sheer repetition, it has taken on an almost boilerplate quality. It's so commonplace, it has begun to lose its emotional resonance in the telling. That's one of the valuable gifts of "Twist of Faith," which premieres tonight at 10. It once again personalizes the priest abuse scandal, particularizing the tragedy so vividly that you can't forget just how profoundly it lays siege on its victims' lives.

As the movie follows Tony Comes, a 30-something Toledo firefighter burning with rage about his early molestation, it doesn't let you vague out on the cruelty and long-term harm of the crime. It is too fiercely specific to shake off.

For "Twist of Faith," which was nominated for a 2004 Oscar, filmmaker Kirby Dick found a compelling lead in Comes. He's a devilishly handsome working-class family man from whom you might not expect to find such emotional honesty about issues considered taboo in his macho world. But he's an open mess after years of secretly questioning his identity as a father, as a husband, as a Catholic, and as a sexual being. His tears and childlike confusion come to the surface with the added intensity of having been forbidden for so long. When he confesses that images of his alleged abuser uncontrollably pass through his mind during sexual encounters with his wife, Wendy, the fact that he has been driven to admit it is as moving as the fact that he has to suffer that way.

Comes is clearly committed to baring all his hurt and bitterness for the cameras, and the intimacy of the movie is profound as it extends into his couples therapy sessions, his first visit to his abuser's cottage since he was a kid, and his day with other victims of the same priest. He describes his years of womanizing as a kind of psychological compensation for the abuse, and he talks about having moments of discomfort with his own son's nudity. In a fraught conversation with his mother, he agonizingly tells her how betrayed he feels that she puts money in the church collection basket on Sundays.

The occasion for the movie is Comes's attempt to bring a case against former priest Dennis Gray and to get an apology from the church, having been inspired to take action after the Boston scandal broke. And the longer Comes's case against Gray stretches on, and the more the church withholds compassion from him, the more disturbed he becomes.

While "Twist of Faith" celebrates his ability to reveal himself publicly as an abuse victim, it also shows him plummeting too deeply for comfort into a culture of victimization. That is part of the curse of the crime, the movie seems to be saying; the healing process can be too consuming. Even catharsis has its price. In a scene when Comes shares details of his abuse with his preteen daughter, it looks as though he may be inappropriately eager to vent his secrets.

But "Twist of Faith" never loses compassion for its lead, even as it shows him reeling out of control and alienating his family. The movie is about scars, not about erasing them. Some of the most powerful scenes are those filmed by the Comeses themselves, since Dick left them cameras when he wasn't on site. Tony's

sleepless nights, for instance, are all the more wrenching for knowing he is alone with the camera. They make a powerful counterpoint to the official footage of Gray's deposition, in which the former priest sketchily answers questions about the morality of having relations with children. Gray's expression is as empty as Comes's is filled with torment.

It might have helped if Dick had given explicit information about how he found Comes in the first place, and the chronology of the filmmaking process. Comes seems to be equipped with cameras before he has even decided to take on the case against Gray. But that's a quibble. "Twist of Faith" is a consistently powerful record of a broken man. It puts an unforgettable face on the many, many names.

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