

TELEVISION REVIEW; Haunting search for the truth

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Author: Shawn Hubler

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"Twist of Faith," the moving Oscar-nominated documentary debuting Tuesday on HBO, opens with the words "Toledo, Ohio," and the taped deposition of a priest.

The Middle American town, the beefy, small-mouthed cleric -- the images are haunting, and they're meant to be, for they also haunt Anthony Comes, the firefighter, father, husband, hometown guy and working-class Roman Catholic who is at the heart of this documentary and who, as it turns out, has just learned that his brand new dream house is five doors down from the parochial high school counselor who he says molested him when he was 14.

What follows is a riveting and heartbreaking account of one man's journey into the thick of what most Americans now know as the "pedophile priest scandal" -- media shorthand for a human trauma that has tended to be framed as particular to Catholics.

In fact, as the documentary shows to grim effect, the emotional core of what happened to so many families is far more universal.

"It was a rape," one of Comes' fellow plaintiffs quietly says.

Not that that makes this story any less complex or shaded.

Comes, it is revealed, was one of many parochial school boys who vied for coveted invitations to the lakeside cabin of Dennis Gray, a popular priest-counselor who used it for overnight youth retreats.

Gray's is the deposition that runs through the film, just as his wide face runs, unbidden, through Comes' most private memories and moments. The priest is heard from only in that deposition footage, although his account, such as it is, is under oath.

An epilogue indicates that Gray publicly denied Comes' allegations, but in the deposition, Gray takes the 5th Amendment when specifically asked whether he molested his students and says he believes that sexual abuse of a minor doesn't necessarily cause serious long-range damage.

The inability to fully hear the priest's side leaves, as the reporters say, a hole in the story, but it also makes room for important questions -- about sex, about power, about the elusiveness of the "whole truth" -- to be raised.

For example, Comes wonders aloud whether, even as a child, he was an innocent victim. Driving past his old church, he explains that, at the priest's cabin, "you could smoke, you could drink, [expletive] rake a pile of leaves 12 foot high, dump a half a can of gas on it, light it, nobody gives a [expletive]. It was cool."

His school picture reveals a boy small for his age, fragile and elfin-looking. When the priest assigned bedrooms and put Comes in his, he confesses, he didn't question, nor did he cry out when he says he awoke to the weight of a grown man on his own small adolescent's body. Nor, he adds, did he tell his parents afterward, or stop going back to the cabin, and, like many rape victims, he is tormented by what his response -- his passivity -- might have said about him.

"It's like there's this siren in your head going, 'This is not happening, this is not happening, this is not happening, this is not happening,' yet the reality is that it is happening," he explains, his mouth curling bitterly at the corners. "And you're trying to figure out why and what the hell do I do and being so confounded you do nothing. And then the shame after. Or now at 33 years old. That I didn't just sit up and [expletive] punch him square in the face."

And yet, the Tony Comes who appears at the start of the documentary seems, for all that, to have moved beyond that horrific burden. He has gone on to a career in which no one questions his manhood; he has a life, now, with two adorable children and a loving wife.

It's only as the film tracks the months to come -- in which he seeks redress and respite, first from the church, then from the courts, then via the crapshoot of the press and the purgatory of the victims' rights circuit -- that the toll of his free-floating rage becomes apparent.

This is thanks, in large measure, to the resourcefulness of Kirby Dick, the director, who gave Comes and his family and friends their own cameras and let them shoot much of the footage without him.

The story, told through careful editing, has an intimacy that at times comes close to feeling intrusive.

Comes talks to the camera in his car, in his living room, in the dark with his sleeping children; he lets it run while he rails at his mother, begging her to stop putting money in the collection that funds the church lawyers.

His wife sits alone in front of her lens and whispers her yearning for the man she married. In one wrenching scene, the camera watches from one side of the family's living room while a weeping Comes tells his frightened little daughter why she must never go near the house down the street, or talk to the man in it, "even if you fall down and scrape your knee on your bike and this person comes up to you and tries to help you."

It's a demanding film but one filled with important truths about humanity in all its denominations. That alone makes "Twist of Faith" important even as the headlines around it now fade.

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'America Undercover: Twist of Faith'

Where: HBO

When: 10 to 11:30 p.m. Tuesday

Rating: TV-MA (may be unsuitable for children under the age of 17)

Tony Comes...self

Wendy Comes...self

Dennis Gray...self

Executive producers Kirby Dick, Sheila Nevins. Director Kirby Dick.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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