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Catholic leaders wary of film; others welcome spotlight on sex abuse, cover-up

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When Adam Lee Ortega y Ortiz, rector of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, first heard about *Spotlight*, a new movie about the Catholic Church's cover-up of clergy sex abuse in Boston, he thought to himself, "Here we go again" and "why would you reopen wounds?"

Serious allegations of priestly misconduct first surfaced in New Mexico over two decades ago when a series of lawsuits were filed against the Archdiocese of Santa Fe accusing four priests of sexual abuse dating back to the 1970s.

The much-anticipated film by Thomas McCarthy, which opens Friday in Santa Fe, relates the story of child sex abuse by clergy and its impact on the faithful uncovered by the Boston Globe's investigative team, which began looking into the local scandal in 2002 after Marty Baron, an editor with the Miami Herald and Los Angeles Times, joined the Globe as its top editor.

In a recent letter, the Most Rev. John C. Wester, archbishop of Santa Fe, wrote to Church leaders and parishioners, warning them the film might trigger "horrific memories that continue to haunt and disturb" New Mexico victims and urging them to reach out to those who have been abused by clergy.

He had reason for concern. New Mexico was once an epicenter of sexual abuse by priests.

Nearly a decade before the Boston Globe began publishing its investigative series, the press in New Mexico was reporting on a scandal here. In April 1993, *The New Mexican* published a series of articles called "Troubled Times: The Church in Crisis." At the time, about 50 adults had sued eight priests, with some suits also naming the archdiocese.

It had become widely known that pedophile priests from across the country were being sent to a treatment center at a retreat in Jemez Springs, operated by the Servants of the Paraclete. After receiving dubious treatment there, priests were released to churches in rural Northern New Mexico, where they continued to molest children. The treatment facility was closed in 1995, and in 2004, the retreat center also was closed.

While McCarthy's film inevitably will touch raw nerves, many people here seem to think the film could have a positive impact by acknowledging the truth of what happened, or by encouraging more people who experienced abuse, or who knew about it, to come forward.

Robert Kiely of Santa Fe attended a Catholic youth camp in Indiana where children were abused by clergy, including a priest who worked in New Mexico. "The more written about the abuse, the better," Kiely said. "As far as the victims are concerned, they've already been victimized."

Thinking of his own devout Catholic family, Kiely said, "There will be a certain group that always thinks the Church is right and this is just propaganda against God. But there will be others who will start to question the Church's role in facilitating child abuse and protecting the abusers. For some to become enlightened and ask questions, that's a very good thing because it shines the spotlight on the Church and those abusers who have torn the innocence from little children."

Lawyers Stephen Tinkler and Merit Bennett, who handled more than 150 church abuse cases, believe the film could have benefits.

"I'm glad they made the movie," Tinkler said, adding that when the stories first came out in the 1990s, they were "impossible to believe because they are so horrible."

Remembering his first interview with a victim in 1992, Tinkler said he had found the story hard to accept himself. But before long, he had many more clients. They didn't know one another, but they all shared similar accounts, he said. Still, he added, many dyed-in-the-wool Catholics didn't believe the stories here until similar stories were affirmed in Boston and California.

Each new burst of publicity tends to bring out new victims. "When they go through this, they bury it and don't pay attention the first time," Tinkler said. "All kinds of people who live in New Mexico didn't hear the scandal in the 1990s and came out maybe 10 years later. I had someone come out this year. It's that hard for people to deal with this."

Bennett agreed that the movie could bring up painful memories, but he said it also could help many victims. He said he has anecdotal evidence that "many, many more children were abused than ever came forward," and they are nonetheless feeling shame and guilt and are trying to suppress the memories. "This may provoke reflection or realization that what happened to them did impact their life in a negative way. It may cause others to come forward, if not with claims, but dealing consciously and openly, because that's the only way you can deal with these things. Like anything else, the more you talk about stuff that is hidden or suppressed, the healthier it gets," he said.

Going to the depths of your being "is sometimes positive and sometimes tragic. But at least they get to take the journey — if they get help," Bennett added.

David Clohessy, director of the St. Louis, Mo.-based Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, has seen the new film three times already.

"I think this movie can only help," he said. "There are still thousands of adults who were victimized by clergy and are still suffering," not to mention thousands more who know of or suspect abuse and are covering it up or keeping silent.

"There are dozens of predator priests working in New Mexico," he added. "Some are still alive and very likely living and working among unsuspecting neighbors and colleagues. And even for predators who have died, there are church staff who could be prosecuted for destroying evidence, intimidating victims and deceiving law enforcement. So it is crucial that people with knowledge about these crimes and cover-ups find some courage to pick up the phone and call police, and the movie will help."

Richard Sipe, a former priest and clinical mental health counselor who has written a lot about clergy abuse scandals, has seen the movie twice and called it “very good.” The film is “so professionally done,” he said, that it “should be very encouraging to victims because it shows them that “somebody is on their side and they’re not alone.”

The focus of the film is not on gory details, he said, but on investigative reporting and “what it takes” to do it.

Sipe, who is finishing testimony as an expert witness in three clergy abuse cases, said it’s important to keep attention on the issue because “the Church has not changed its operation. It’s put out a lot of paper and a lot of superficial things and some things that are helpful, but the clergy culture is the same.”

The Catholic Church “still has a reformation on its hands,” Sipe said, because it continues to hold onto the ideas of “exclusivity,” “specialness” and “secrecy,” and it “favors adolescent behavior, even among its priests.”

“In the long term, it will change,” he said. “But it’s very rough now.”

For New Mexicans, the movie will seem to cover a lot of old ground.

Throughout the 1990s, there were regular reports in New Mexico of people coming forward with allegations of sexual abuse. To date, there have been more than 250 of them — although Tinkler said the rate has slowed. “The good thing is, it doesn’t appear to be happening here anymore,” he added.

Annette Klimka, the victim assistance officer at the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, said she has met with three victims so far this year to assess their need for counseling. In her eight years on the job, she has met with more than 10, she said, but fewer than 20.

“What we want to emphasize is that we can’t change the past, but look at what we’re doing now,” she said.

Wester’s predecessor, Michael J. Sheehan, took over as the archdiocese was engulfed in the priest abuse crisis and worked to clean things up. He announced a zero-tolerance policy, some priests were removed, and a training program to prevent sexual abuse became mandatory for all clergy, staff and even volunteers. Sheehan also called for background checks and more careful screening of candidates for ordination. Victims were encouraged to report cases of abuse to the archdiocese.

Such efforts are still working, Ortiz said: “We are continuing to work on healing and hoping to regain the trust of people who find it hard to protect children.”

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The U.S. Conference on Catholic Bishops has similar policies and regularly audits compliance. A 2004 audit showed that the Archdiocese of Santa Fe paid \$25.3 million in settlements and another \$1.1 million in counseling costs for 193 people.

One reason New Mexico had so many victims was the Servants of the Paraclete.

Sipe has written extensively about the Servants of the Paraclete community founded in Jemez Springs in 1947 and the controversy over its treatment methods. He said there was no other center at the time specifically for the renewal of priests with sexual or alcohol-related problems. Its mission expanded to Santa Fe and other cities in New Mexico, as well as to houses in other parts of the world, including Rome, the British Virgin Islands and South America. Many closed in the mid-1990s amid media scrutiny of the Paracletes.

Beginning in 1992, a series of lawsuits alleging sexual abuse were filed, naming the Servants of the Paraclete and the group’s treatment facilities. The group’s response was that little was known about psychosexual problems prior to the 1980s and 1990s, and that it had been following the advice that said men could be cured and returned to the field. The archbishop at the time and his staff was aware of the practice of allowing guest priests who had been accused of sexual abuse to work in local parishes in the 1960s, decades before the first criminal cases were filed.

The Diocese of Gallup also was slammed with many abuse lawsuits, forcing it into bankruptcy (which Santa Fe barely avoided). It has had to sell property to cover settlements. The new bishop in Gallup posted on the diocese’s website the names of 31 members of the clergy and lay people credibly accused of sexual offenses, going back to the 1960s. Most of them are deceased.

While most Catholics probably don’t rely on Spotlight reviews published by the Catholic News Service, it calls the new movie “painfully illuminating.”

“The clergy abuse-themed drama ... is a movie no Catholic will want to see,” it said. “Whether it’s a film many mature Catholics ought to see is a different question entirely.”

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