

10-30-07 - Book Review: "Crosses-Portraits of Clergy Abuse"

By LESLIE BRODY, STAFF WRITER , The Record (NJ)

A new book by Carmine Galasso, an award-winning photographer at The Record, focuses on the scars of hidden wounds inflicted long ago by predatory priests and nuns.

"Crosses: Portraits of Clergy Abuse" contains black-and-white photos of 30 adults who endured excruciating ordeals as children. In detailed interviews, they share graphic memories of sexual abuse, brutal rapes and intimidation by the authority figures their families trusted most.

Patricia Anne Cahill, for example, recalls how the priest who pursued her would take off all his clothes, except for his white collar. If she tried to flee, he locked her naked inside a cold, dark closet. She was only 5 or 6.

Galasso calls his subjects victim/survivors, and spent three years traveling the country to record their faces and memories. For many, the abuse had relentless consequences, including depression, drug abuse and sexual confusion. Some were shunned by their families. A few attempted suicide.

This scandal got widespread public attention only in recent years. In 2004, a study commissioned by Catholic bishops reported that 10,667 Catholics had accused 4,392 priests of sexual abuse between 1950 and 2002. Experts believe that victims who spoke up are only a small fraction of those assaulted. Catholic dioceses have been forced to pay more than \$1 billion to settle victims' legal claims.

The emotional and spiritual fallout can't be quantified. Galasso's book aims to make sure it's not forgotten.

Q: This is such a disturbing subject; what attracted you to it?

I grew up Catholic, went to Catholic school through high school, and never experienced abuse in any way and never saw it ... but it interested me on a personal level. I have always enjoyed photographing people who are victims in some sense, particularly victims who then rose up and were healed either by themselves or by some sort of help. ... That said, I really wasn't prepared for the depths of the damage.

Q: How many of these people lead happy lives now?

Some of them may think that they're living normal, healthy lives and I guess maybe they are ... but I could see they're still hurt, at the very least, and angry.

Q: A few of these subjects describe their own offenses as adults, such as grand larceny, drunken driving and domestic violence. One shot the priest who molested him. Do you find yourself excusing their bad behavior?

I don't excuse it but I understand it. Maybe it's a symptom.

Q: How has this project affected your attitude toward the church?

I'm not really religious, I don't really even go to church. But I cross the George Washington Bridge every day, and lots of times I'll say a little prayer before I cross the bridge, or talk to my father, who's been dead for many years. These are spiritual things. I'm so angry at the church for the way they treated these people. The act [of abuse] is horrible in and of itself, but then what the church did after that is like another abuse. The bishops would shuffle [pedophile] priests from parish to parish and they would do the same things at the next parish. ... It's the ultimate betrayal for Catholics.

Q: Do you worry about backlash from Catholic readers or your family?

Sure. I'm not looking for a confrontation with anybody. ... I ended the book with the picture of the damaged angel. Some people might see that as depressing, that there will be no good out of all this. ... The angel's

missing a wing and an arm, it was really beaten up. But it's holding a child very beautifully. Despite the beating it took, it's still standing.

Q: Did you ever wrestle with whether to believe the subjects' stories?

There are 30 people profiled; I could have done 3,000. Their stories had to be compelling and there had to be something that made each one believable to me. Almost all of them had been to lawyers. I would say maybe a third to a half of those who pressed charges had settlements with their archdioceses so far. However, I didn't want to show just people who had payouts, I wanted to show some who got screwed again because of the church hiding behind the statute of limitations.

Q: Walk me through a picture.

Let's go with Johnny Vega [of Paterson]. This was one of the first times he was able to summon the strength to drive by the church [where he was raped as a child]. I wanted to photograph the church [reflected] on his car window. The church almost looks like the evil empire. The layer of the shadowy empire, the church, is over him, showing it still holds some sort of weight. This is a guy who went through many changes, because he was a little kid who was horribly abused and raped, and it was a very nasty physical thing. The priest was a very big, brutal guy -- scared the hell out of him and his friends.

Johnny thinks he's over it. My opinion is no.

Q: What do you hope the overall impact of the book will be?

There are still people who refuse to believe this happens. This is a truth, a fact, and I want people to know it. What makes this "special," if you want to use that word, is that this abuse comes from the person who should be the most highly trusted person in their community – a priest or a nun. So many of these people, when I interviewed them, said the priest is the closest thing to God on earth ... They really believed that, and that was the cause of so much tumult and confusion. That the person who was the most trusted person in their life could do such a thing – it caused a lot of these people to think they were the bad person, that they caused the priest or nun to go to hell. ... It's a really deep wound.

One of the reasons I went with "Crosses" as the title is that it's a cross they have to bear their whole lives.