

REVIEW - Twist of Faith

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PARK CITY, Utah - A father sits down with his 8-year old daughter. When daddy was very young, he explains, a priest did very bad things to him - sexually abused him. The little girl doesn't say anything, and it's hard to tell whether she understands. So he goes further, and gets more graphic. He drops bombshells.

The point is, the father says, that the man who did those things to daddy lives a few houses away and daddy just found this out, and daddy wouldn't have moved into this neighborhood if he had known the man lived here. So if you ever see this man, if you fall on your bike and even if you're bleeding all over the street, and this man wants to help, the father says, tell him to go away.

That father is Tony Comes, a Toledo firefighter who filed a lawsuit against the Toledo Catholic Diocese in 2002 alleging that former Toledo priest Dennis Gray sexually molested him when Mr. Comes was a teenager. And that scene, one of a number of harrowing moments of blunt force, plays out in *Twist of Faith*, the Oscar-nominated documentary about the Toledo Catholic Diocese sex-abuse scandal that debuted here at the Sundance Film Festival last weekend.

Twist of Faith is the most deeply affecting film I've seen at the festival this year. After viewing it, you are angry or mournful or both.

Mr. Comes shot that moment with a digital video camera from filmmaker Kirby Dick. It's one of Dick's signature methods, used on a number of his previous films, including *Chain Camera*, a record of everyday school life as seen from the view of students. In *Twist of Faith*, it's more effective because kids are hams around cameras, but people in pain are not.

Dick's instructions were simple: Record everything you think is relevant. And so spliced throughout *Twist of Faith*, inserted between the footage that Dick and producer Eddie Schmidt shot in Toledo from late 2002 to early 2004 (with help from local filmmakers, including Elspeth Kydd and Tom Hofbauer), are moments of intimacy and hurt that make you feel as if you've intruded on lives that have been rubbed raw by distrust.

You also wonder how much the camera's presence affects the subjects' behavior. It's a point relevant to almost any documentary, but especially here, because the subjects do so much of the filming. And yet every time you start to wonder, another moment of painful honesty knocks you back. The tears (on screen and from the audience), and the anger that comes with them, are far from calculated.

Mr. Comes says he doesn't sleep much anymore, and the image that burned into my brain is Mr. Comes wandering down his street in the dead of night, alone and carrying the camera as a heavy snow falls. He's unsteady and the camera's first-person point of view feels ominous - almost suggestive of those moments in a slasher film when all we see is what the serial killer sees. It's profoundly unsettling.

"That is where the monster lives," Mr. Comes says and points the camera at Mr. Gray's home.

Mr. Gray was forced to step down as dean of students at Rogers High School in September, 2002, after an article in *The Blade* revealed allegations of sexual misconduct during his career as a priest. Most of the cases were settled out of court; Mr. Comes received a \$55,000 settlement.

As for Mr. Gray, he denies the accusations, and though the final stretch of the film goes into the settlement that Mr. Comes eventually agreed upon with the diocese, the larger point here is that the nationwide sex-abuse scandals in the Catholic Church are not a failure of a religion, but a failure of a bureaucracy and a leadership that allowed alleged abuse to happen. Dick would have scored major

points if the diocese or Mr. Gray himself had been willing to talk (they turned him down). But because they don't go on camera, because their side is not heard from, their silence unquestionably (perhaps unwittingly) lends *Twist of Faith* more dramatic power.

One Toledo priest who does go on camera is the Rev. Stephen Stanbery. "I don't think bishops are accountable enough to people," he says, and at the screening I attended, that simple line got a smattering of applause, perhaps because *Twist of Faith* feels as much like a take on abuse of power as it does a dissection of one victim's case.

The film also includes interviews with David Yonke, *The Blade's* religion editor, and Michael D. Sallah, now assistant managing editor, investigations, as well as footage of Toledo news conferences and clips from local television.

You can see why Dick chose Mr. Comes. The details of his story are engrossing, ugly, and even inspiring, and Dick doesn't throw a barrage of sensational twists at us in the first few minutes. It's a masterful way of conveying suspense without exploiting the subject.

At least an hour has passed before we learn that some of Mr. Comes' closest friends and family think he's tearing down the church, and you feel for him. And as much as it's Mr. Comes' story, his wife, Wendy, becomes nearly as sympathetic.

She talks about converting to Catholicism before she married Mr. Comes, and then we learn that the priest who married them, the former Rev. John Shiffler, was removed from the ministry for allegedly sexually abusing boys when we was a teacher at Central Catholic High School.

Make no mistake: This film, when it airs on HBO later this year (or possibly gets a theatrical release), will be tough going back in Toledo. *Twist of Faith*, better than most documentaries that handle religion, conveys how much a community can find its common threads in its faith, but for better and certainly for worse. If Toledo here is a relentlessly grim factory town of frozen lakes and belching smoke, it suits the tone of the story. At the film's end, Mr. Comes is wrestling with how he feels about his daughter receiving first communion, and his solutions are far from comfortable and sure.

As he said after the screening, "I don't trust the people in charge of the people."

But all I could think of was Bob Dylan's great line about power and religion:

"You never ask questions/When God's on your side."