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PBS to air documentary about clergy abuse in Alaska

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 18, 2011 NCR Today

When I reviewed Amy Berg's 2006 Oscar-nominated film about clergy sex abuse, "Deliver Us From Evil" [1] about Oliver O'Grady, a former priest described as "the most notorious pedophile in the history of the Catholic Church," I wrote that it was "the most difficult film I had ever watched."

Now *Frontline*, a public affairs program produced by WGBH in Boston and aired on PBS, is airing the story of three sexual predators in Alaska in "The Silence," and I think this is the most difficult television show I have ever watched.

Compressed into 30 minutes, it was very intense and the descriptions quietly graphic. I was in tears at the end.

Journalist Mark Trahant, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe, who has been writing about Native Americans for his entire career admitted, "Nothing could prepare me for what happened in St. Michael." The story is based on his reporting; the film was written and produced by Tom Curran.

The documentary will air tomorrow night, Tuesday, April 19, on PBS.

St. Michael is a small, isolated village in the Fairbanks diocese, located about 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle. The parish, also called St. Michael, had Jesuit pastors for the most part, though it has not had a resident pastor, it seems, for some time (the parish Web site [2] and the documentary have differing information). The first full-blooded Eskimo to become a Jesuit brother entered from the parish in the 1920s and died in Montana in 1931.

In 1968, Jesuit Fr. George Endal and a lay helper, Joseph Lundowski, who had been hired by Endal some years before, came to St. Michael. Lundowski was studying to become a deacon but most people looked up to him as a priest. Over the next seven years, almost all the children of this village were molested or raped by these two men, carrying on what they had begun in other places along Alaska's west coast. Lundowski was caught in the act in 1975 and sent away, but Endal continued to abuse the children for another eight years. The police were never contacted.

Another priest, Jesuit Fr. Jim Poole, known for his radio programs broadcast out of Nome, has multiple lawsuits pending against him for sexual abuse in Alaska (and one from Portland, Ore., according to www.BishopAccountability.org [3]). He has denied all these allegations.

This 30-minute documentary is a heartbreaking testament to the courageous victims of clergy sex abuse and its

devastating effects. Attorney Ken Roosa of Anchorage said that "there was nowhere for kids to hide. There was no one they could talk to. The adults believed the abusers over their own children. It was a perfect storm for molestation."

One man, Ben Andrews, recounts that when he told his father what the priest had done, his father grabbed his belt, "? and he hung me upside down. He beat me and told me never to talk about priests like that. My dad went out. He came back pretty drunk and I saw him holding a pistol in his hand. He looked at my mom, and pointed the gun at her. The gun went off and my brother was in the front. The bullet pierced both of them. I held him in my arm. My brother didn't have to die just because I told my dad the truth."

As part of the settlement between the Fairbanks diocese and the Jesuits and the victims, Bishop Donald Kettler, was required to apologize to the victims.

In August 2002, Kettler, a priest from Sioux Falls, S.D., became the first diocesan priest to head the Fairbanks diocese. In October, the Boston Globe broke open the clergy abuse scandal; Kettler probably had no clue of the ripple effects that would impact his diocese and how it would change him.

Because she got no response after meeting with Kettler, a lawsuit was put in motion by Elsie Boudreau, who was abused for almost 10 years by Fr. Poole (something he has always denied). "To not be acknowledged, not to be validated, not to be comforted, nothing. He didn't get it."

Initially Kettler would not admit, for example, that Lundowski had been an employee of the parish. Documentary evidence discovered by Roosa, however, could not be denied. Almost 150 victims joined the class action suit.

Kettler said in 2010 that he would not have been able to apologize eight years before. "I don't think I understood the hurt that existed in communities. The process that I went through was a deeper understanding of the depth of the hurt. We can never do enough to make up for what has happened to them (the victims) personally."

As part of the settlement agreement, Kettler was required to travel to the villages where there were victims and apologize publically and to each of the victims. He is the first bishop since the scandal broke to do so.

Frontline "gained unique access to Bishop Kettler's visit to the village of St. Micahel --frequently called 'ground zero' for the abuse" and according to the diocesan Web site, the local church seems prepared to accept that this story will be told for all to see http://www.cbna.info/homepagenews/PBS_Frontline_Episode.shtml

There is footage in the show of what looks like depositions of the bishop and then his actual meetings with victims in St. Michael in December 2010. I found it uncomfortable to watch his discomfort especially when he says, about apologizing to victims and taking responsibility for what happened, he had "to learn ? I guess, how you are gonna say it." We see and hear Kettler open a listening session with the victims, express his sorrow and celebrate Mass for the few survivors who attended. He starts off very stiff and blunt but not unkind; he just seems to have no experience in ministering to people on this level.

Kettler told victims from the pulpit: "I offer you both my apology and a little explanation of what I am attempting to do now, so that what happened to many won't happen again." Then he asked forgiveness from each victim, one by one, anointing him or her as he did so: "Please forgive me and the Church for any hurt that has come to you from the Church."

Even in giving an apology, the bishop ritualized the asking of something more and deeply precious from the victims, one by one: their forgiveness.

One hundred-fifty six victims have come forward to accuse these two priests and one layman of sexual abuse. I think the persons who tell their stories in the film are among the most heroic people I have ever seen and heard.

On March 25 this year, the Jesuits reached a $166.1 million settlement with victims in the five states belonging to the Oregon Province of the Jesuits. The Fairbanks diocese will give $9.8 million as part of a bankruptcy agreement to the 300 Alaskans abused between the 1940s and 2003. Because of the statute of limitations, none of the priests or those accused of sexual crimes in Alaska will ever be prosecuted.

(Note: The quotes in this review are from the script provided by *Frontline*.)

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