

Priest Scandal Echoes Family's Decade of Pain

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Most of the nation has been shocked by this year's revelations of priest sex abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. Bill and Judy weren't.

The east San Fernando Valley couple has lived with the consequences of Father Richard Allen Henry's betrayal for more than a decade. He was a close family friend who earned the trust of their sons. Then he molested four of them one by one. The parents responded by becoming more active in their church and trying to keep Henry from going to prison.

The family's experience is a textbook case in the pain errant priests and an overly protective church have caused. Some of this was on display in Dallas last week when America's Catholic bishops, debating a new child-abuse policy, were addressed by victims whose hurt and confusion echoed Bill's and Judy's.

The case of Father Richard Allen Henry resonates because it involved individuals who are still enmeshed in the abuse crisis, which has put more than 50 current and former Los Angeles archdiocese priests under suspicion.

The key figures are:

* Cardinal Roger M. Mahony and his top representatives, who went to great lengths to protect Father Henry. The archdiocese paid his \$30,000 bail and therapy bills and kept his identity secret by never announcing his departure from the parish. The archdiocese also made little effort to remove Henry from the priesthood.

* Bill and Judy, who went on to become founding members of Mahony's Sexual Abuse Misconduct Board, which reviews cases involving clergy abuse. The parents, who are still members of the board, say that their activism was fueled by a desire to ensure that no more children would be abused by priests. Their last names are being withheld under a Times policy of protecting the identities of victims of sexual abuse.

* Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley, then a supervising prosecutor, who attended Henry's court hearings and successfully pushed for a maximum eight-year prison sentence. Today Cooley decides whether to file charges on complaints of clergy abuse.

* Henry's lawyer, Donald Steier, who represents most of the former and current priests who are under investigation.

Henry, who lives in Maryland, is among the few priests in the three-county Los Angeles archdiocese to be convicted of child molestation. (The archdiocese has identified only one other convicted priest: a man who was placed on 10 years probation and committed to a state mental hospital for two years in 1983.

Bill and Judy's ordeal began on a late summer evening in 1991 when the police arrived at their door in Sunland. The big family--including four daughters, four adopted children and three foster children--were outside taking wedding photos of one

daughter and her husband.

The police told them the priest had been molesting several of their children.

“We didn’t believe it,” Bill said.

A Continuing Pattern

Father Henry was the 40-year-old associate pastor at Bill and Judy’s church, Holy Redeemer in Montrose, when he befriended the family in 1985. He soon began taking the boys to baseball games and he attended family barbecues and pool parties. He baby-sat while Judy ran errands. And then, a few months after meeting the family, he began abusing their oldest son, an altar boy.

For three years, Henry molested the boy in church, at the rectory and on trips to San Diego and Washington, D.C.

When that boy reached puberty, the priest turned his attention to a younger sibling. Then a younger one. The pattern continued even after Henry was reassigned from Holy Redeemer to another church.

Finally, after six years, one of the younger boys told his biological parents during a weekend visit. They told a nurse at a mental health clinic who alerted authorities.

Police interviewed all 11 children that night in 1991. The children told police they were scared that the family would be torn apart; two of the boys Henry was accused of

abusing were foster children who had been previously abused.

Bill had grown up at Holy Redeemer as an altar boy. The family attended Mass regularly. Several of the children went to Catholic school. Bill and Judy loved a house full of friends and family. They were committed to helping children in need.

“And now,” Judy said, “we hear this.”

Archdiocese officials say that Henry confessed hours after the police came to Bill and Judy’s home. He was arrested by Los Angeles police and booked into County Jail.

His first visitor was Cardinal Mahony. Henry had asked to see him.

“He wanted to apologize for what he had done and all the harm he had done to these boys,” the cardinal said recently. “He was quite subdued.”

Within weeks the family returned to Holy Redeemer. Henry had been gone since 1986, when he was transferred to Our Lady of the Rosary in Paramount. The church never formally told parishioners at either church about Henry’s arrest--not even after the parents started sharing their story.

Bill, 59, and Judy, 53, talk about those days with a calm, earnest focus. They say they thought that a lone priest--not the Catholic Church--failed them. They say they never desired vengeance, but were determined to help the church understand how much hurt priest sex abuse caused families.

For all Judy's patience, when Mahony sent two representatives, including the vicar in charge of personnel, to her home, she was repulsed.

"I said, 'I'm going to kill them.' I never wanted another priest in my home again. Ever," she recalled recently. "I said, 'Please leave.' "

They left but gave her the name of a psychologist. Once the parents' anger cooled, they arranged therapy sessions. For more than six months, seven children saw seven therapists once a week. The parents attended weekly therapy sessions together. Every three weeks, the family went as a group. The archdiocese paid for all of it.

Still, a question nagged at Bill and Judy, a question they needed to ask the priest.

How could you?

Henry had entered a not-guilty plea to four felony counts of lewd acts upon a child. The archdiocese had put up his bail, and Henry had been released to an archdiocese retreat house. Bill and Judy went to see him.

'Why Did You Do This?'

"One side of me wanted to jump up and strangle him," Judy said, "and the other side"--her voice dropped, its anger exhausted--"saw this young man, like one of the boys."

The confrontation lasted 90 minutes. She yelled at him, "Why did you do this?" He

was remorseful and apologetic, the parents said. All three cried.

A few months later, Henry changed his plea to no contest, essentially a guilty plea. Judge Howard J. Schwab ordered him to a weeklong evaluation program at St. Luke Institute, a Maryland-based treatment center for clergy members, before sentencing.

Back in court, Henry's lawyer, Steier, sought probation. Instead, the judge again postponed sentencing, ordering Henry to St. Luke's for a six-month treatment program. The archdiocese paid for the treatment, according to documents, at a cost of several hundred dollars a day.

At first, the parents were incensed. Then they decided to visit St. Luke's, to decide whether Henry was being treated or merely hiding. They read books about child abuse, met with experts on pedophilia, talked to therapists.

The meeting lasted 4 1/2 hours, according to a confidential report prepared by a St. Luke's psychologist for the archdiocese. It said Henry "was responsive to their confrontation ... and understood how he had affected the family."

The children had already suffered before we took them in, Judy says she told Henry, "and you took them and did it again. How could you do that?"

When Henry returned to California for sentencing, the parents joined his lawyer, the archdiocese and the psychologists from St. Luke's in urging the judge to keep Henry out of prison. Continued therapy was the only remedy for controlling this incurable condition, Judy says. "They just perfect their pedophilia in prison." Only the district

attorney's office and one probation officer recommended prison.

Henry, who began as a pastor in Long Beach in 1972, was described by friends, family and associates in pre-sentencing reports as smart and extremely remorseful.

None of that mattered to Cooley, the supervising deputy district attorney in the San Fernando Valley.

Therapist's Report

"Eliminate the fact that he was a member of the clergy and what do you have? You have a serial child molester," Cooley said in a recent interview. "Everything else is irrelevant.... I didn't see any difference between other pedophiles and Richard Henry."

As district attorney, Cooley said, the same standard will apply. "We're not going to carve out special wink-and-nod situations for certain professions."

On the day of Henry's sentencing in April 1993, Bill told Judge Schwab that he and Judy were "here to see justice done. I think other kids need the chance to have him rehabilitated rather than just locked up, and eight years from now getting out feeling bitter, desperate and going back to whatever he felt like doing."

Among the documents submitted to Schwab was a report by a therapist at St. Luke's, who said Henry had "a good beginning in understanding just how hostile and abusive he was toward children and has developed some empathy for his victims." The psychologist recommended that Henry continue individual and group therapy and that

he “not be alone in the presence of people under the age of 18.”

Probation Urged

Henry, the therapist wrote, was beaten and verbally abused as a child. He also said Henry never advanced emotionally beyond adolescence--a syndrome that has been associated with many cases of priestly abuse. “From a psychological point of view, it is not surprising that he molested.”

Father Timothy Dyer, the vicar of clergy, admitted that the archdiocese had no plan for how to handle Henry but urged Schwab to give the priest probation. “The archdiocese is prepared to work with Mr. Henry, if we have the opportunity to do that, to make sure, first of all, that he is far from children, far from teenagers while he continues in a therapeutic setting.”

Henry told the judge: “I wish, I wish with all my heart I could erase what I did with the kids, that it never happened ... take it away, go back in time. I can’t. The only thing I can do is get in recovery, heart and soul.”

His attorney, Steier, acknowledged that his client was “a sick guy.... It’s an illness. He acted wrong. He’s sick. That’s why the treatment is so important and he won’t get the treatment in state prison.”

Steier today says that he was calling for “an enlightened approach.... You’ve got the chance to treat it like you would an alcoholic--you can’t cure him, but you can treat

him. It's an absolute shame that we have to go through this eye-for-an-eye approach."

Schwab disagreed.

"To me what happened here is a tragedy of the utmost degree," the judge said. "It has torn everyone apart. It is tearing me apart right here.... But what happened is a human being took advantage of a position of trust.... I feel his actions over the ... years were predatory, I really do.... He committed these acts knowing that the children were vulnerable.... This is what breaks my heart."

With that, he sentenced Henry to eight years in state prison. It was a measure of how little attention priestly abuse attracted a decade ago that media coverage was scant. The Times, for example, published a short article on the seventh page of an edition circulated in the Valley.

Shortly after arriving in prison, Henry was stabbed in a fight; his lawyer contends that the inmates knew immediately he was a child molester. He received little or no therapy.

"I guess that's justice," Steier said sarcastically.

Henry was released on parole in August 1996. Mahony said the archdiocese sent Henry a letter at the time to inform him of the procedures to remove him from the priesthood, but he never responded. Under canon law, Mahony said, the priest is entitled to respond and to have an advocate speak on his behalf. That has not happened. (Mahony said he and other bishops have asked the Vatican to speed the

process.)

“After he got out of prison, he disappeared from us,” Mahony said.

But The Times found Henry. Now 56, he lives in Montgomery County, Maryland. He declined to discuss his life. “It was a very painful time in my life and for the people I hurt. I really don’t want to discuss it.”

Failing to Register

While he is a registered sex offender in California, Henry has failed to register in Maryland. Under that state’s law, a serious sex offender registered in another state must still register in Maryland if the crime occurred before 1997. The Maryland Department of Public Safety and Corrections is looking into the matter, along with local police, after inquiries by The Times.

Bill and Judy found Henry too. They visited him while he was undergoing treatment at St. Luke’s after he was released from prison.

The parents saw their children through adulthood. “We are survivors,” Bill said.

They say that they have stayed on the cardinal’s abuse misconduct board to continue pushing for change. They speak to gatherings of priests because they want the church to forthrightly acknowledge the victims in these cases--not to be dragged into it. Recently, the board pressured the archdiocese to adopt a policy of informing

parishioners when their priest is transferred because of a child-abuse investigation.

Bill and Judy say that the board is planning to review all the archdiocese's older abuse cases to determine how they were handled--or mishandled. They want to know if they were lied to.

The parents are dismayed that a brochure they helped write about sexual abuse several years ago is only now being distributed to parishioners.

"My goal 11 years ago was the same as it is today," Judy said. "To make sure no one else is abused by priests. That's it."

For a second she thought about what she'd said.

"I could not go out on a limb and say that this couldn't happen again," she said. "It could."