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Movies Abuse survivor leads audience through painful aftermath

By **Moira Macdonald**
Seattle Times movie critic

The numbers are staggering: thousands of accusers filing claims of sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic priests, millions of dollars paid in settlements across the country, countless families devastated by the crisis within their church. But for his documentary "Twist of Faith" (airing at 10 tonight on HBO), Kirby Dick wanted to tell just one story: of a victim turned survivor.

Dick, a longtime documentary filmmaker ("Derrida," "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist") who brought "Twist of Faith" to the Seattle International Film Festival last month, said he had been following the stories of abuse and cover-up within the church as they unfolded in recent years. "I was horrified," he said, "but also struck by the fact that it was really hard to see the story behind these horrific facts and figures."

To find the one subject on which to base his film, Dick contacted numerous chapters of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. He was put in contact with representatives in Toledo, Ohio, who led him to Tony Comes. A handsome, then-33-year-old firefighter with a wife and two young children, Comes had just made the decision to go public with his accusations against Dennis Gray, a priest and religion teacher at Comes' high school.

In 2002, Comes added his name to a lawsuit against the Toledo diocese, as one of 11 complaints filed against Gray. The priest, Comes alleged, repeatedly sexually abused him on weekend trips to a Michigan cabin that Gray would organize with groups of teenage boys.

"I think we were looking for someone the audience could really identify with," said Dick of selecting Comes for the film. "It's a hard subject for people to want to think about, and I think they try to put it aside, so we were looking for someone who was very compelling and very charismatic."

The film, a devastating look at how the alleged abuse has affected Comes' life, had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, and was an Oscar nominee for best documentary. It's often painful to watch, because of Comes' willingness to share with the camera moments of intimacy, such as the day when he and his wife told their young daughter about the abuse. Gray, they had just learned, lived down the street.

"I don't think there's ever been anything like that in film before — that moment when a family has to tell their daughter about their experience being abused," said Dick. That conversation took place before Dick met Comes and began the film; Comes, thinking that some day he might be involved in a lawsuit, made his own decision to film it with his own camera.

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[enlarge](#) LAURIE ROBERTS Tony Comes is the central figure in "Twist of Faith," about his confronting the trauma of past sexual abuse as a boy. He has filed suit against a Catholic priest, accusing him of the abuse. The Oscar-nominated documentary will air on HBO tonight.

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"Twist of Faith": Kirby Dick's documentary premieres tonight at 10 on HBO. The documentary will air again tomorrow, Thursday and Friday.

For more details: www.twistoffaith.net or www.hbo.com/docs/programs/twistoffaith/

"He wanted to be able to show a jury that this is still present, this is not just something that happened 20 years ago — it's still affecting how he relates to his children, in a very devastating way. So he chose to videotape that," said Dick. The scene, in which Comes carefully speaks in words his little girl can understand, is loving, gentle and heartbreaking.

Having subjects film themselves, without an extra person operating the camera, is a technique Dick has used in other films, and he used it frequently in "Twist of Faith." Comes, when he can't sleep, tells the camera how he is feeling, how scenes from his past haunt his present. Or he walks the streets with the camera — standing outside Gray's house on a cold night, he says simply, "This is where the monster lives." And Wendy, his wife, shares her own torment. At times you're startled in watching these scenes — it seems unimaginable that someone could open up so freely to a film crew, and then you realize that there's no crew, just a person sitting alone, speaking to the camera's light.

Though the film focuses tightly on Comes and his story, we do get a sense of other characters in this real-life drama. Gray, who twice declined the filmmaker's invitations to speak on camera, appears only in courtroom deposition footage, coolly denying the charges (though the church eventually made settlement payments to Gray's many accusers). He has since left the priesthood.

And Matthew Simon, a high-school classmate of Comes who says he also was abused by Gray, appears in the film, as a co-filer in the Toledo lawsuit and as a supportive friend. Simon, who now lives in Seattle and manages the downtown Cartier store, had long thought that he was alone in his accusations. He had first gone to the diocese with his story in 1995, with little satisfaction (though they did offer to pay for therapy). In 2002, his brother-in-law, a lawyer, told him of the looming lawsuit in Toledo and asked whether he wanted to add his name.

"It was a real revelation for me," said Simon. "I wasn't happy that it happened to other people, but I thought, my God, I'm not crazy, I'm not the only one this has ever happened to." At the time of the abuse, Simon was 14. "I thought I was the only one — that's what you think."

Simon, who had long ago shared his story with family and friends (helped, he says, by years of therapy), served as an inspiration for Comes. Dick said it was important for Comes that Simon be in the film, because "Matt's already paved the way."

The film, says Simon, creates a dialogue — as he's repeatedly seen when accompanying the film to festivals, such as Sundance and Seattle. At the first Seattle screening, he said, two friends saw the film for the first time, and Simon ended up staying up late with them, talking about it. "There's so many perspectives; it brings up so many questions that people never have considered before."

Dick, who is now in production for his next documentary (an investigation of an organization that he will not name), says "Twist of Faith" is not anti-Catholic, and wasn't intended to be.

"I was really struck by the positive things that Catholicism brings to a community like Toledo — so important for the social fabric. It explains why Tony so desperately wants to remain Catholic."

In the film, Comes struggles with his feelings as his daughter approaches her First Communion. "It's not an issue of being anti-Catholic, but of focusing the responsibility on the hierarchy."

"One of the questions people always ask [about abuse survivors] is, 'Why can't they get over it?' This is one of the objectives of the film, to show the impact."

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