

Victims of clergy abuse share sense of broken trust

By DAVID CRARY
Associated Press

Some spiral into suicide or lonely despair; others become articulate crusaders for change, supported by loving families. The common bond, for victims of sexual abuse by clergymen, is a piercing sense of betrayal.

"There is an element that hits your soul, and you think it was God who treated you that way," said Cindy Desrosiers, who successfully sued a priest for molesting her as a little girl. "It takes an effort to realize, 'No, it was a human being who was the furthest thing from God.'"

Desrosiers, of Augusta, Maine, is among hundreds of abuse victims who have joined SNAP — Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. The group, founded in 1991, offers emotional support to victims and monitors responses of church officials to abuse scandals such as the one now roiling Boston's Roman Catholic community.

Even as Catholic leaders offer apologies and promise to stop sheltering abusive priests, members of scarred families — like Janet Patterson — remain cynical.

Patterson blames the 1999 suicide

of her 29-year-old son, Eric, on abuse by their parish priest when he was 12. Her advice to other stricken families is stern: "Don't assume the church has your best interest at heart. They're more concerned with containing a scandal than helping a child."

Patterson, of Conway Springs, Kan., remains bitter that Catholic officials in her diocese knew of abuse allegations against the local priest, yet alerted no parishioners. A year ago, the priest was sentenced to prison for abuses committed in a different Kansas town.

"Here were all these young men wondering what's wrong with them, that they've been singled out by this priest," Patterson said. "If it hadn't been kept quiet by the diocese, they would have known they weren't alone."

The group's national director, David Clohessy of St. Louis, says his group includes many people who struggled with destructive habits.

"Drugs, alcohol, sex, numbing kinds of things — most survivors have at least some span of their lives where they're addicted to something," he said.

Clohessy, 45, said he was abused

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Janet Patterson

by a priest as a boy and repressed the bad memories until he was in his 30s. He admires victims who have retained their faith, but he has been unable to do so himself.

Janet Patterson and her husband, Horace, also have stopped going to church, as have two of their three surviving children. The third has become a Methodist.

"It's too painful to go and realize the leaders betrayed our family, and other families," Janet Patterson said. "My faith in God isn't shaken, but my faith in the church has definitely been shaken."

Desrosiers, 37, says she sometimes drops into a Catholic church in Augusta during quiet midweek hours. "I'm not very popular with some of the Catholics," she said. But she has no interest in raising her son and daughter in the faith: "My kids have seen what I've been through."

In 1998, Desrosiers reached a \$527,000 settlement in a lawsuit filed against the Rev. Robert Kelley, who she said abused her as a 5-year-old in Southbridge, Mass., in the late 1960s.

The legal confrontation with Kelley was therapeutic, Desrosiers said.

"In the memories and nightmares, I was a little kid, and he had total control over me," she said. "Seeing him when I was an adult, it was healing. I was getting the control and he was losing it."

Desrosiers now coordinates the support group's operations in Maine and has lobbied the legislature to toughen sex-crime laws.

"The more I speak out, the better I feel," she said.

Bottling up anguish was at the root of Eric Patterson's depression and suicide, his mother believes.

"He was a normal boy; he took his faith seriously," Janet Patterson said.

"His senior year in high school, he said he didn't want to be confirmed, didn't want to go to church anymore. I had no idea why he was struggling."

Eric fatally shot himself in October 1999, only a few months after he first told one of his sisters he was molested as a youth by the Rev. Robert Larson. A year ago, Larson was sentenced to three to 10 years in prison for abuses committed in 1984-86 while a priest in Newton, Kan.

During the trial, one of the Newton victims confronted Larson.

"I thought you were the closest thing to God on Earth, and that if I was close to you that I would be closer to God," said Darren Razor. "But then you, Robert Larson, changed all that when you started touching me."

With the Boston scandal bubbling, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Wilton Gregory, apologized Wednesday to victims of clergy abuse and their families, expressing sorrow "for this failure in our pastoral responsibilities."

He pledged to try to stop abuse, and called on all Catholics "to resolve to work together to assure the safety of our children."

It wasn't quite the statement that



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Horace and Janet Patterson mourned at their son's grave in July 2000. Eric Patterson committed suicide in 1999.

Clohessy is waiting for.

"I long to see the day when a bishop stands up and says, 'We as a church are grateful to these survivors because they took a courageous step that has enabled us to clean up our own house and protect kids and give others the strength to come forward.'"