

The scandal that won't go away

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SUPPOSE YOU were asked to name one of the biggest criminal coverups in American history. Maybe you would point to Wall Street or to the White House or to another political institution.

But the Roman Catholic Church? This is just one of the questions to emerge from a new documentary about decades of sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests as church leaders kept silent or actively kept evidence from police.

How did this widespread abuse happen? How did it go on for so long?

"Holy Water-gate: Abuse Cover-up in the Catholic Church," by filmmaker Mary Healey-Conlon, touches on those questions and more in one of the most searing examinations of how church leaders turned a deaf ear to what surely is American Catholicism's most serious crisis, not to mention the most extensive coverup of criminal behavior in the nation's history.

The numbers speak volumes about how horrible this story is - some 11,000 children raped or abused by more than 4,000 priests during a 40-year span. But those numbers are conservative estimates, approved by the church officials. The truth may be even worse.

The sheer enormity of this scandal almost renders it too much to grasp, though. Indeed, the numbers are so surreal that ordinary people can be forgiven for asking: Did all this really happen? This is why "Holy Water-gate" is so important.

The film will be shown on Showtime cable television in the coming weeks as a companion to the much-publicized made-for-TV drama, "Our Fathers." But while "Our Fathers" uses actors and invented dialogue to portray real events, "Holy Water-gate" presents unvarnished reality, including interviews with two New Jersey abuse victims.

Such reality can be shocking. We watch real people who put their trust in real priests and bishops at real churches - only to see those priests, bishops and church institutions fail miserably. But the film begins with a challenge that continues to haunt the scandal.

"Something happens when life shows you something deeply disturbing," the narrator says. "At first, you don't believe it - first, you are terrified. Then you make one of two choices: Either you turn away or you look."

In a way, such words explain why "Holy Water-gate" has had a difficult time getting attention. Too many people - including prosecutors and journalists - simply want to ignore this horrific scandal. Despite winning a major investigative documentary award last year and being shown in Canada, Australia, Spain and Switzerland, only now is "Holy Water-gate" being shown in America.

The film works on many levels. But most significantly, it reminds us (again) of the size of the scandal and coverup - and why non-Catholics need to pay attention.

Perhaps more than any other single factor in recent years, the scandal has drained American Catholicism of money and prestige as critics question how bishops can preach about society's moral shortcomings when they did so little to clean up the criminal behavior under their noses.

Several dioceses have declared bankruptcy to pay legal settlements. Others have sold off property. And despite denials by church leaders, it's worth asking if this continued erosion of money and moral power will eventually hurt the church's important network of hospitals and social services for people of all faiths.

To its credit, the church formed committees to examine the scandal and rewrite disciplinary policies after abuse reports reached a crescendo in 2002. But far too many church records are still secret.

This question of accountability is one of the most important themes of "Holy Water-gate." "The victims were largely ignored or not believed," Healey-Conlon said in an interview from the University of Rhode Island, where she teaches filmmaking. "People did not want to believe that this [scandal] was true. That was something I wanted to dispel in making the film."

One of the film's most compelling accounts involves the Rev. John Bambrick, now 40 and the pastor of St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Manalapan. As a boy, Bambrick was sexually abused by a priest, but never spoke publicly about it until after his own ordination to the priesthood.

When he came forward, though, Bambrick faced internal church charges for airing the church's dirty laundry. The charges were later dismissed, but Bambrick's ordeal underscores how deeply secretive the church continues to be.

Another film highlight centers on Mark Serrano, now a Washington-area marketing executive. As a youth in Mendham, Serrano was one of at least two dozen boys abused by the Rev. James Hanley. The abuse remained secret for years until Serrano broke a silence agreement with the Paterson Diocese and came forward.

After Serrano told his story, other victims spoke up. Serrano never knew others were victims, too, in his parish. He thought he was alone.

Serrano points to a church "culture of secrecy" that he says contributes to more coverups. Such a culture, Serrano adds, can only be overcome by efforts such as "Holy Water-gate" or criminal investigations by police.

"This film might prompt someone, somewhere to say they were abused," Serrano said. "It might prompt someone to call the police."

Yes, this scandal really happened. The question now is whether the coverup will fully unravel, finally. Thanks to "Holy Water-gate," there is hope.
