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A Priest's Burden

He Now Seeks Censure of Allegedly Abusive Former Mentor

By Stephanie Saul
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Dallas - To John Bambrick, a 15-year-old boy who dreamed of becoming a priest, it seemed strange that the Rev. Anthony Eremito was holding his hand.

The New York priest clung tightly to it during the movie they viewed together in 1980, shortly after they first met.

Bambrick, now 37 and a priest himself, doesn't remember the title of the film, but he recalls the hand-holding, the hand-kissing and the intense hugging that followed as the weeks went on. He vividly remembers how, over the next six months, Eremito began rubbing his torso, then his buttocks and genitalia.

All the while, Eremito assured him that such physical contact was normal within the brotherhood of priests.

When Bambrick finally refused to have sex with Eremito, the elder man cut off their relationship, explaining that he had found another boy who was more willing.

Now the pastor of a church in Mana-lapan, N.J., Bambrick recently decided to go public with his story, 22 years after the abuse occurred. He did so because he learned that Eremito, whom the New York Archdiocese removed as pastor of Holy Cross Church on West 42nd Street in the early 1990s, had resurfaced as a hospital chaplain in Texas. It was the second time Bambrick had found Eremito working as a priest since Bambrick took his story to Cardinal John O'Connor in the early 1990s and says he was assured that would no longer be permitted. From 1997 to 1998, Eremito had worked in the diocese of Trenton, 45 minutes from Bambrick's own church.

Eremito, now 62, has an unlisted phone number and could not be reached for comment. Efforts to contact Eremito through the hospital where he had worked, the diocese of Lubbock and by leaving telephone messages at his home were unsuccessful.

"He continues to cling to the priesthood because that is his gateway to kids," Bambrick said. "They use our collar, our faith, to access children for their own evil desires."

Bambrick wants Eremito removed, once and for all.

"As far as I'm concerned, I will do anything I have to do to stop this man. That's the bottom line," Bambrick said during an interview as the nation's bishops gathered last week to form a policy on sexual abuse by priests. "I don't want any other kid to suffer."

Bambrick was waiting in the hotel lobby, hoping to get a meeting with Cardinal Edward Egan. His plan was to ask Egan to begin the process of laicization for Eremito, a lengthy and formal proceeding that requires approval from the Vatican and results in the priest's return to a lay state.

Bambrick first requested that sanction in the early 1990s, when he took his story to O'Connor. Eremito, the target of other complaints as well, ultimately was removed from his job in a church just

across from the Port Authority Bus Terminal - the entry point to New York for runaway youths from across the country.

The late cardinal told Bambrick the laicization process would be too difficult and time-consuming, Bambrick said, but O'Connor gave his assurance that Eremito would never again work as a priest.

"O'Connor made a personal promise to me," Bambrick said. "He said, 'I will leave him as an unassigned priest, absent on leave. He is not allowed to wear the collar or use the title.'"

Somehow, that promise was broken.

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, Joseph Zwilling, said last week that Eremito had been granted permission to work in Lubbock in 1998. At that time, church officials in Lubbock were notified of the allegations against him, Zwilling said. Around Easter of this year, Eremito's name was turned over to the Manhattan district attorney's office on a list of allegedly sexually abusive priests, Zwilling said, and he was removed from his job at Covenant Medical Center in Lubbock, where he apparently had been working in a restricted capacity.

Noting that O'Connor was dying of cancer in 1998, Bambrick said he hopes O'Connor signed the permission letter when he was too sick to know what he was doing.

"I really admired Cardinal O'Connor and I really, really hope that it was a diocesan official that wrote that letter, that someone slipped it on his desk and he signed it," Bambrick said.

Growing up in a devoutly religious family, Bambrick had aspired to be a priest since he was 5 years old. He met Eremito in 1980 when he was 15 and working in his church in Keyport, N.J. Eremito, then a priest at the Church of St. Margaret's of Cortona in the Bronx, had come to New Jersey to perform a wedding ceremony, Bambrick said.

Learning of Bambrick's desire to become a priest, Eremito befriended him and regularly began visiting him and his family.

A priest who had been Bambrick's mentor had recently died, and Bambrick had prayed that another would come into his life to serve as a shepherd, guiding him on the path to priesthood. In Eremito, he believed that his prayers had been answered. Eremito promised to assist him in his quest to become a priest in the Archdiocese of New York.

Eremito seemed to be a gentle, kind and generous person. He showered Bambrick with attention.

"You think they love you, but they're using you," Bambrick said. As their friendship continued, Eremito began taking Bambrick to motel parking lots and announcing that he wanted to rent a room and have sex with Bambrick.

Bambrick said he kept his story to himself for 11 years. In the early 1990s, just before his own ordination in New Jersey, he notified O'Connor of the abuse, he said.

The sexual abuse policy adopted last week by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops requires that abusive priests be removed from their jobs, but it does not necessarily require laicization. Egan, while not specifically addressing the Eremito case, said Friday that he will seek laicization in cases of clear sexual abuse.

After the bishops announced their policy Friday, Bambrick said he would still prefer laicization against Eremito but would accept a plan in which Eremito would enter a monastery with an enclosure, if he publicly confesses his sins.

Bambrick told his story to the Manhattan district attorney's office earlier this year and said he believes another victim also contacted authorities. He wants to get the story out, hoping that criminal charges

can be brought against Eremito if someone whom he might have abused recently comes forward.

"Please publish his name," Bambrick urged a reporter, noting that Eremito also had worked as a priest at St. Raymond's in the Bronx.

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