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## Priest Who Saw Abuse from Other Side Becomes Watchdog

By Richard Lezin  
New York Times  
July 7, 2002

He says he was told and it came from the mouth of the molester himself -- that he had not been the first. He feared that he would not be the last. But where could John Bambrick turn?

Not to those confidants in the church with whom, as a young seminarian, he first shared his story of teenage sexual abuse by a priest -- they were just as powerless as he was. Not to New York archdiocesan leaders who dismissed the Bronx priest who he said had abused him -- only to have that priest end up working at a children's hospital halfway across the country. And it seemed pointless to go to the authorities, because the statute of limitations had expired.

So, with little other recourse, John Bambrick -- now the Rev. John Bambrick -- looked to the only person he felt would be vigilant enough to alert others about this and other abusive priests: himself.

Lacking certification or formal training as an investigator but fortified by his own resolve, he became an amateur detective of sorts. He has spent the last 10 years tracking a fellow servant of the church who he said abused him, and warning others about his past.

Father Bambrick, 37, a pastor at St. Thomas More Church in Manalapan, has trailed the priest, the Rev. Anthony J. Eremito, from state to state, located others who said they were abused by him and foiled at least one of Father Eremito's attempts to practice as a priest.

Along the way, Father Bambrick has identified at least half a dozen other New York priests who he says have been accused of molesting children. In recent months, he has turned their names over to prosecutors and church officials. He has also given the Manhattan district attorney's office copies of virtually all his notes, documentation and correspondence -- hundreds of pages in all.

His investigation, which has included a face-to-face appeal to Cardinal John J. O'Connor and a clandestine meeting with a shadowy informer, has at times seemed more suited to an espionage novel than the workaday life of a parish priest from New Jersey. And he has done it with nothing more than his own determination, gas money, shoe leather and the basic research skills he used while preparing his graduate thesis at Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University.

But he does have another important tool: his clerical collar, which has allowed him access to libraries and other select documents, and given him entry to crucial figures in the church hierarchy. His role in the church has also afforded him an uncommon double perspective -- as both priest and victim -- on the sexual abuse crisis.

As he moves between those worlds, Father Bambrick hopes to promote greater acknowledgment of victims, more accountability by the church and a measure of healing for both. "In some way I see myself as a bridge between those who have been sexually abused and the church," he said recently.

But Father Bambrick contends that a reconciliation can occur only when church officials fully acknowledge their role in protecting sexually abusive priests and their failures to root them out.

Joseph Zwilling, the spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, said that Father Eremito was removed from his duties in the archdiocese in 1992, after allegations of abuse.

Father Eremito, 62, who until March was a chaplain at a children's hospital in Lubbock, Tex., has an unlisted telephone number and did not return requests for comment left with the Lubbock Diocese or the hospital, Covenant Medical Center.

Church officials in New York and Lubbock have each said that the other is responsible for Father Eremito's 1998 appointment in Lubbock. Mr. Zwilling said that the New York Archdiocese told the Lubbock Diocese about Father Eremito's history, a claim that Lubbock officials rebut. "We didn't know," said Pat Behnke, a spokeswoman for the Lubbock Diocese.

That such confusion still persists disturbs Father Bambrick.

"That really galls me," Father Bambrick said. "You're talking about all the resources and the money and the access of the Catholic Church, and they found nothing. And here I am a priest from southern New Jersey, and I found out everything."

In 1980, he said, as a 15-year-old altar boy from Matawan, N.J., he met Father Eremito -- who had crossed the Hudson from his Bronx parish, St. Margaret of Cortona Church -- to say Mass at a wedding. The boy mentioned that he hoped one day to become a priest, and when the service ended, he said, Father Eremito asked him for his phone number, promising to help him prepare for seminary.

A few weeks later, Father Bambrick said, the abuse began -- he said it started with holding hands and grew into touching his genitals and buttocks -- then continued for six months. Like many victims, Father Bambrick said he was sickened and embarrassed, and told no one.

Although he did not need any additional incentive to keep quiet, Father Bambrick said that Father Eremito supplied one. "He told me that he had a complaint in his file, from a case in the 60's," Father Bambrick said, adding that the boy who lodged that abuse complaint had ended up in a mental institution.

Eleven years later, as he was about to be ordained in 1991, Father Bambrick said he had "a crisis of conscience."

"My whole life is sort of poised for this moment, and all of a sudden, I don't know if I can do this," he said. "All the things the church was supposed to be about -- to speak the truth, to protect the poor -- how can I do that when I know this man is still molesting kids? I felt that I would be a phony."

Thumbing through a copy of the Catholic Directory, a sort of white pages for church officials, he came across a familiar name: Anthony J. Eremito. He was listed as the pastor of the Church of the Holy Cross, at 42nd Street near Ninth Avenue in Manhattan.

Father Bambrick said he wrote an anonymous letter to the diocese describing the abuse, and gave the name of an intermediary through whom officials could contact him for more information. He said that barely a month later, church officials told him through the intermediary that their investigation had ended after Father Eremito denied having abused anyone.

Mr. Zwilling, the archdiocesan spokesman, said that efforts to investigate the allegations were hindered because the complaint was anonymous, but that in the next year or so, the archdiocese removed Father Eremito.

Father Bambrick did not know that, however, and wanted to be sure the priest would not victimize anyone else. So he began his investigation.

Taking note of each church listed in the directory where Father Eremito had served, he began quietly asking colleagues if they had heard of any allegations against the priest.

On a tip, he traveled from his Maple Shade, N.J., parish to St. Raymond's Church in the Bronx, where

Father Eremito served during most of the 1980's, and began investigating. "I put on my high collar, my cuff links, my wingtip shoes," he said.

His collar, he found, was like a passport. "Everyone said, 'How can I help you, Father?' "

He was invited into the library and school to look over documents. He pored over tuition records, scanned yearbooks and copied the names of students who matched the description of those who he was told might have been victims of abuse.

Working various sources over the years, Father Bambrick has identified other men who he said were sexually molested by Father Eremito. He contacted some, though not all wanted to work with him.

In early 1993, after joining the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, Father Bambrick again contacted the diocese about Father Eremito, this time corresponding directly with Cardinal O'Connor. In a July 1993 letter, the cardinal wrote Father Bambrick, "You have a right to know that the Congregation for Clergy has formally upheld my removal of the individual we have discussed from his duties as pastor."

Five years later, Father Bambrick learned that Father Eremito had been saying Mass at St. Agnes Church in Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 38 miles from Father Bambrick's parish in Manalapan, and informed the archdiocese. Mr. Zwilling said the archdiocese told Father Eremito to stop.

Father Bambrick shared the account of his abuse with only a few people until June, and since then his life has been a blizzard of television appearances and newspaper interviews. On the Sunday that his story was told in The Asbury Park Press, parishioners gave him a standing ovation.

Everywhere that Father Bambrick goes now, it seems, people question how he could have chosen to serve the church in which he suffered such abuse.

"What happened to me, it was done by one man," he said. "He doesn't represent the church; he doesn't represent God. You have to trust the one who made the promise."

He added: "I know the source is trustworthy. I know God is trustworthy."

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