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Gay NY Priest's Road to a Lonely Exile in London

By Curtis Rist
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A well-known gay priest - cleared four years ago after a sex trial that captured headlines on both sides of the Atlantic - said he faces paranoia, fear and "an ineluctable loneliness" as a result of his ordeal.

"It has left an indelible mark," said the Rev. Bernard Lynch, 44, in a telephone interview from what the Irish-born priest calls his "exile" in London, where he is working for an ecumenical AIDS counseling group.

Lynch said he is on an official leave of absence from the Archdiocese of New York and the priesthood.

"It succeeded in breaking my basic trust, particularly that trust in the goodness of my own church."

Lynch, a champion of AIDS patients, was accused in 1987 of fondling a student of his at Mount St. Michael's High School in the Bronx.

Gay-rights activists quickly portrayed the charges against him as a trumped-up conspiracy involving the FBI, the Bronx district attorney, and even Lynch's employer, the Archdiocese of New York. Lynch had been a leader of the gay and lesbian group Dignity, which was barred from holding a weekly mass in a Greenwich Village church by Cardinal John O'Connor in 1987.

During the trial a year later, the sex charges against Lynch unraveled. The alleged victim, John Schaefer, gave conflicting accounts of the alleged seduction, then refused to testify any further. The judge found Lynch not guilty.

But that was not the end of the matter for Lynch.

"This was an enormous crisis for him - personal, moral, existential and metaphysical," said Charles Frederick, a former board member of Dignity who helped with Lynch's defense. "There was vindication, but that's the most superficial kind of healing."

In a book published today in London titled "A Priest on Trial," Lynch revisits the case - and lays the blame on the church's doorstep for what he considers his false prosecution.

"It was clear to everyone that this was a witchhunt," writes Lynch. "The archdiocese in general and Cardinal [John] O'Connor in particular were out to make an example of me."

No role has ever been substantiated, and the archdiocese has denied any involvement in the case. But Lynch said he does not consider it a coincidence that received no legal or financial support from the archdiocese, nor any word of encouragement.

In his book, Lynch writes of his tortured life before he accepted his homosexuality. "God, please don't let me be queer," he remembers praying as a young man. "Let me be normal."

But he grew to accept his homosexuality as his "creativity in God." As a priest in New York, he

worked with AIDS patients and preached acceptance of gay and lesbians in the church even as the Vatican, in 1986, labeled homosexuality an "intrinsic moral evil."

He reserves his harshest words for the leaders of the church he says he loves:

"As a priest of Christ," writes Lynch, "I am outraged at the murder committed by my Church on the souls of so many people, thousands of whom died from AIDS in darkness and despair because of this unjust doctrine."

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