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Pain Was Affair's Gift to Priest, Woman

March 28, 1991 | PATT MORRISON | TIMES STAFF WRITER

On a January night, after spilling out his story, Father Henry Tamayo walked out into the garden and gazed for a long time at the winter stars.

"Where did it go?" he asked.

A friend wondered what Tamayo was looking for.

"I had a weight on my shoulders," Tamayo told him, "and it's lifted."

There was no such epiphany, no such date or place for Rita Milla, now 29, the young woman who said she was seduced first by Tamayo, then by six other priests. She later sued them and the archdiocese for fraud and clergy malpractice.

Yet she, too, has gradually felt herself freed of burdens: of feeling guilty, of being accused of making it all up, of being called by a bishop a woman with a "bad reputation." And Tamayo's coming forward "made me feel that I wasn't crazy, thinking all this conspiracy stuff."

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For Tamayo and Milla, once priest and parishioner, and for a time lovers, the years since the 1984 lawsuit brought some common experiences: Both said they were despondent and once considered suicide; both saw their families damaged by the scandal; both say they want the church to take responsibility, and both became disillusioned about elements of their church.

As a devout teen-ager, Milla went to church each morning, and said she spent four months in a convent after high school. Since 1984, though, she has not set foot in a church, nor have her parents, her sisters, or her daughter by one of the priests. "I'm afraid of going to church, any church actually. I gave myself so much to the church that I don't want to put myself or my kids in that situation again."

Tamayo spent months in the Philippines when, even though he was acting as a priest, he struggled with self-reproach and "couldn't pray." He has always wanted to apologize to Milla, yet he was "sorry" her lawsuit had named the archdiocese as well.

In the years after the suit was filed, as friends fell away and "even a few relatives didn't believe me," Milla married, then divorced a man who couldn't cope with the scandal. She has since remarried a "perfect" man, and they have a 1-year-old son.

But she always wanted her story to be corroborated, to help others in her quandary, she said, perhaps organizing a support group or writing a book. "It's good that Tamayo showed up because it's always been in my conscience that this could be happening to somebody else."

As a teen-ager, "I was very trusting and I wanted to be very obedient to the church." She was also shy, confused and sometimes depressed, she said, which made her vulnerable to the sexual advances of priests.

All that happened to "a different person. I don't think it could happen to me now."

"I'd like to see the bishop and the church come out and say that it was true, say that they did want to cover it up. I'd like them to offer child support, not just to myself but to anybody else who comes to them saying they have a little one from a priest."

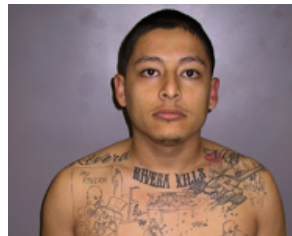
The toughest part has been telling her daughter all this. "I try to give her information little by little." For now, the girl is content, Milla said, to see "only a picture" of her father; "she wouldn't want to talk to him."

But the girl also asked a few months ago whether he had left because she was "a bad baby," said Milla. "The kind of person he is, running off and not caring about her, I think I was better off without him."

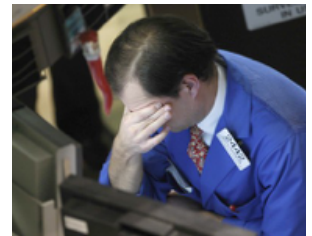
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