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Parishioners say Deacon's comments blame parents for sex abuses

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McALLEN — Some members of Holy Spirit Catholic Parish are decrying a deacon's comments on priests' sexual abuse of children that he made during Sunday Mass. The parishioners say church deacon Alvin Gerbermann told them parents — not the Roman Catholic Church — are to blame for any abuse their children suffer at the hands of priests. They said they are angry and hurt by what they described as a yet another example of the Church failing to take responsibility for its role in the sexual abuse scandals that have rocked the institution in recent years.

"I think what we've been experiencing is that the diocese — and not only the Diocese of Brownsville, but other dioceses as well — seem to be projecting the reason for this on the people [who suffered the abuse], rather than on those who committed the abuse. And this homily seemed like just another attempt to do this," said Harold Mosher, a longtime parishioner who heard the homily at Sunday's Mass.

When reached by phone, Gerbermann refused to comment before he could even hear questions on the subject.

"In that case there's no comment. Bye," he said, abruptly hanging up.

The homily, a portion of Mass explaining a selection of Bible readings, came the same day that members of a local Catholic lay group screened a documentary about the Church's sex abuse scandals at Cine el Rey in McAllen. The Diocese of Brownsville, which controls the local PBS affiliate, had caught flak over its decision not to air the documentary during the station's regular programming several weeks earlier.

Parishioners said they weren't sure if Gerbermann's timing was coincidental or intentional — but either way, he expressed opinions they said they did not care to hear.

Roland Quintanilla, who, like Mosher, has belonged to Holy Parish since its inception in the early 1980s, said he felt physically revolted by the deacon's words.

Quintanilla said he has a close childhood friend who was sexually abused as a girl by their parish priest in Corpus Christi. He said the homily seemed just another case to him of blaming the victim — the last thing his friend or other abuse survivors need, he said.

"It wasn't her fault and it wasn't her parents' fault," Quintanilla said. "When I was hearing this, I just really — I started feeling sick to my stomach."

Gerald Brazier, the president of a local Catholic reform group calling for more transparency in the Church, agreed. His group, the Rio Grande Valley chapter of Call to Action, helped arrange the Sunday screening of the PBS documentary.

"Parents end up being just as much a victim as the young person was. So really when you step back, this is just blaming the victim," Brazier said.

For his part, Mosher said he felt Gerbermann, who held his own parents up as exemplars because they never let him alone with a priest or nun, had painted the risk of sexual abuse by priests in overly broad strokes.

Mosher said he counts several priests as his close friends and would never have considered telling his teenage daughter not to spend time with them.

Diocese spokeswoman Brenda Riojas took a different view of the problem of child sex abuse, saying that anyone could molest children and that both parents and the Church have a responsibility to protect them.

"The diocese believes strongly in the safety of a child," she said.

But she added, "It's not just one group that we have to worry about."

Riojas declined to specifically comment on the homily, as she had neither seen nor read it. But she pointed to a program the diocese implemented several years back that trains all its employees and volunteers — not just priests — to ensure children's wellbeing and safety.

Rev. Louis Brum, Holy Spirit's pastor, did not return messages on Monday seeking comment.

This is not the first time controversy has brewed at Holy Spirit in recent years. The parish made local and national news when lay employees there and at three other Valley parishes unionized in 2002. Three of Holy Spirit's employees later sued the Diocese, claiming they were fired in retaliation for their unionization. As part of a settlement, the Diocese reinstated the employees in 2003, but three of the employees left their jobs last fall, saying a bitter environment was too much to handle.

Quintanilla, who weathered that controversy, too, said he is still hoping Gerbermann will recant.

"I would hope that he would apologize," he said. "Because there might have been people in there that have been affected, too, and I was wondering how they felt, how they felt when they heard that statement."

Kaitlin Bell covers Mission, western Hidalgo County and general assignments for The Monitor.

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