

SPOTLIGHT | PART 1

Children of Catholic priests live with secrets and sorrow

By Michael Rezendes | Photos by Suzanne Kreiter | Videos by Emily Zendt | Globe Staff, August 16, 2017, 2:00 a.m.



Jim Graham, who believes he is the son of a Catholic priest, held his father's crucifix at his South Carolina home. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF



This is the first of a two-part Spotlight series. [Click here to read part two.](#)



With his parents already dead, Jim Graham pleaded with his Aunt Kathryn and Uncle Otto to tell him the truth about his family. Finally, Kathryn unfolded a newsletter published by a Catholic religious order and slid it across the table. She jabbed a finger at a picture of a sad, balding figure wearing a priest's clerical collar.

“Only the principals know for sure,” she said, “but this may be your father.”

ADVERTISING



Now Streaming on HBO Max

 HBO Max - Sponsored

[Sign Up](#)

Jim Graham studied the picture. Those were his eyes, his nose, his mouth. Then he skimmed the obituary of the priest, the Rev. Thomas Sullivan, a cleric who had

graduated from Boston College and trained for the priesthood in Tewksbury.

If a life can have a crystallizing moment, for Jim Graham that 1993 meeting was it, discovering that his father might have been a Catholic priest, rather than John Graham, the distant man who raised him with scarcely a kind or comforting word.

Jim Graham couldn't know in that moment that the stunning secret which had seemed his alone was not that unusual. By any reasonable measure, there are thousands of others who have strong evidence that they are the sons and daughters of Catholic priests, though most are unaware that they have so much company in their pain. In Ireland, Mexico, Poland, Paraguay, and other countries, in American cities big and small — indeed, virtually anywhere the church has a presence — the children of priests form an invisible legion of secrecy and neglect, a Spotlight Team review has found.

Their exact number can't be known, but with more than 400,000 priests worldwide, many of them inconstant in their promise of celibacy, the potential for unplanned children is vast. And this also comes through loud and plain: The sons and daughters of priests often grow up without the love and support of their fathers, and are often pressured or shamed into keeping the existence of the relationship a secret. They are the unfortunate victims of a church that has, for nearly 900 years, forbidden priests to marry or have sex, but has never set rules for what priests or bishops must do when a clergyman fathers a child.

The church likewise makes no formal provision for the support — emotional and financial — of the mothers involved, or their children, allowing priests who father children to treat their secret offspring as a crisis to be managed rather than a life to be nurtured.

Sometimes, these sons and daughters are young when they learn of their father's identity, and first feel the absence of a true paternal presence and bond.

“All I ever wanted was for him to take me out in public for an ice cream and say, ‘I’m so proud of my daughter,’ ” said Chiara Villar, a 36-year-old suburban Toronto woman who has known that her father was a priest since she was a toddler, but was told to refer to him outside the home as an uncle. “I just wondered why he couldn’t be my dad, so I started to take the blame on myself.”

Others, like Jim Graham, make the discovery as adults. For a few, the knowledge comes as a relief, the answer to years of longstanding doubts and troubling questions. But many others are shattered by the blunt truth, and their feelings of disillusionment and abandonment can lead to lives scarred by sundered relationships, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. Many find their faith in the church itself broken, as they recognize that an institution held out as a beacon of moral truth has countenanced, or looked past, priests who father children but shun a father's responsibilities of support, attention, and love.

Emily Perry learned that her father was a priest in perhaps the most shocking way possible: Her older brother saw a TV report about a Salem priest who had fathered two children and later abandoned their mother to die when she overdosed on sleeping pills in 1973. Perry's brother soon learned that the Rev. James D. Foley was their father and shared the cruel news.

“The first time I went to church after the story came out and I found out he was my father, it really bothered me,” said Perry, who was 31 and living in Stoughton when she learned the truth in 2002. “I walked into the church and said, ‘Wow, this is more important to you than your own child or the woman who bore your own children?’ ”



James Perry and his sister, Emily, discovered that their father was a priest, the Rev. James D. Foley, and that he had left their mother under disturbing circumstances. ERICH SCHLEGEL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE; TRAVIS DOVE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

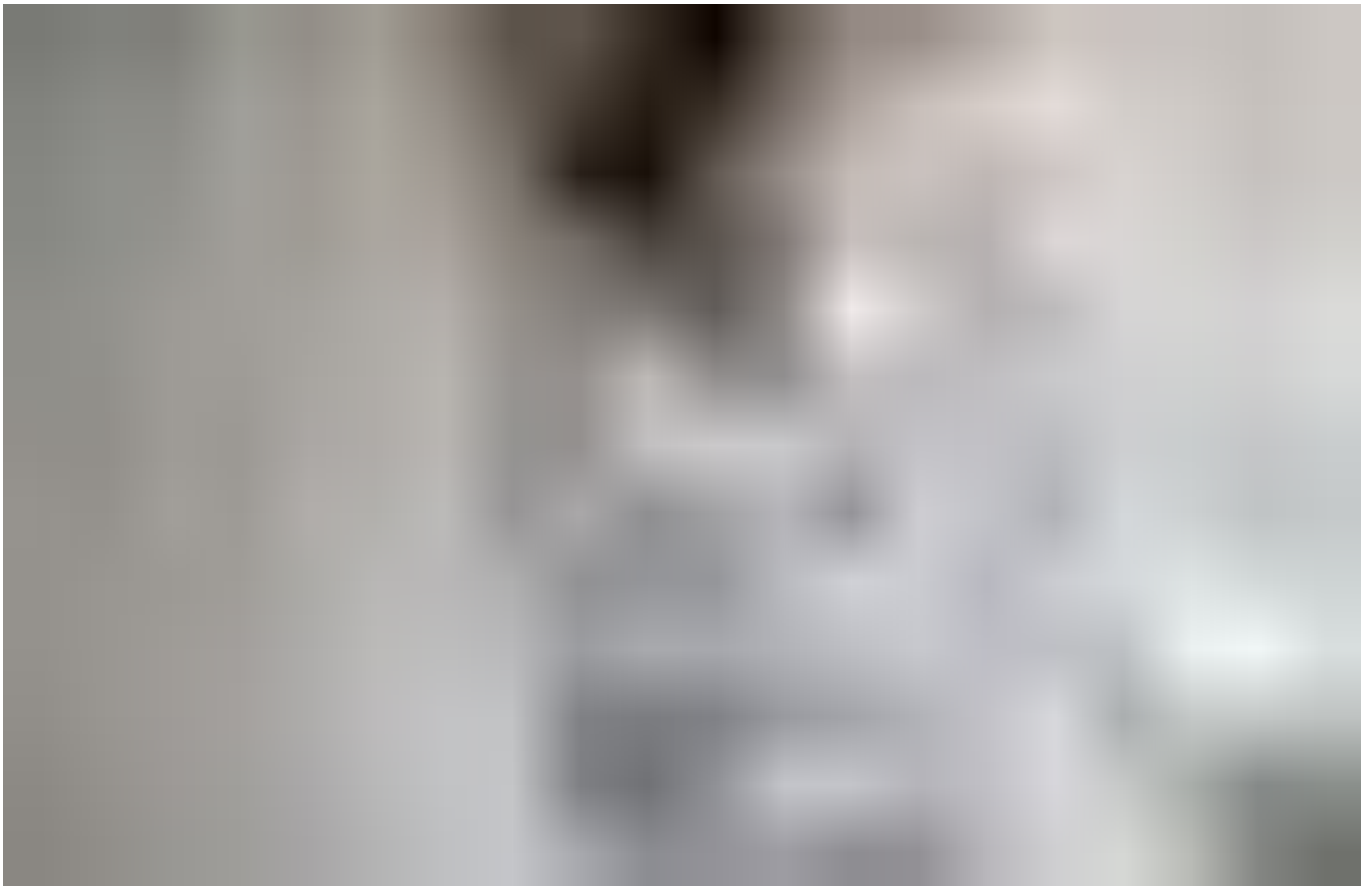
Still more children of priests, especially those put up for adoption, never know the identity of their biological fathers.

Church regulations provide nothing in the way of direction to priests on what they should do if they father children, relying on the priests' generosity — or, simply, their conscience — to determine how much support to provide. And though priests have doubtless been fathering children throughout the long history of the celibacy requirement, canon law is silent on the subject of a bishop's responsibility when one of his priests fathers a child.

Some priests in cases reviewed by the Globe took their responsibility seriously. They were devoted fathers, albeit in private. Some promised the women who mothered their children that they would leave the priesthood, though few ever did; and still others consoled the women with assurances that it was only a matter of time before the

church dropped the celibacy requirement, which pope after pope, including Francis, has declined to do.

But even in cases where the priest tried to be a good father, the tension between the demands of faith and the demands of family can be wrenching. Villar's mother finally stopped believing the man who fathered Chiara would keep his word when he vowed to abandon the priesthood; she wound up marrying another man.



Maria Mercedes Douglas had a daughter with a Catholic priest. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Often, the priests failed to take full financial or legal responsibility for their children, and neither the church nor the women who bore their children took any legal action. In 10 cases reviewed closely by the Globe, only two of the mothers went to court to obtain child support, while others left it up to the priests to decide how much to

provide for their offspring, and found scant help there.

Six children received no financial support from their biological fathers at all. And priests who did provide child support made the payments, in some cases, on the condition that their identities remain secret.

In some cases, the demand for secrecy was unnecessary. The mothers were devout Catholics who deferred to the men who were not only the fathers of their children, but representatives of God. Their deference echoes that of victims of clergy sexual abuse who told the Spotlight Team investigating that scandal that they were often reluctant to report their abusers, imagining they themselves were somehow to blame for what had been done to them, since their abusers were considered holy men.

[MORE: Read the statement from Cardinal Sean O'Malley](#)

Vincent Doyle, the son of a priest and founder of [Coping International](#), a website that offers support for the children of priests, noted that if only 1 percent of the 400,000 priests worldwide have fathered a child, there would be a minimum of 4,000 sons and daughters of priests who may need emotional and other assistance from the church.

Priests fathering children has been a fact of church life for so long that the Irish, to name just one example, have put a name to it. The Irish surname McEntaggart, for instance, comes from the Gaelic for “son of a priest,” while the surname McAnespi is commonly thought to mean “son of a bishop.”

It was a plain fact of life, but not of public discourse.

“People knew, but didn’t talk,” Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin told the Globe.

But global leaders are beginning to pull back the curtain on the phenomenon. Three years ago, in a blistering report on clergy sexual abuse, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child worried that Catholic priests were coercing women who bore their children into remaining silent in exchange for financial support.

The UN committee asked the Vatican to “assess the number of children fathered by Catholic priests, find out who they are and take all necessary measures to ensure that the rights of those children to know and to be cared for by their fathers is respected.” The committee gave the Vatican until Sept. 1 of this year to respond.

Recently, the Vatican’s office at the United Nations in Geneva invited Doyle to meet with its ambassador, Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, adding that the office is “constantly” working on a response, although it declined to provide details.

“Since we are getting closer to the finalization of the work we are not in the position to release any declaration or forecast on the Report,” read the e-mail Doyle received.

Read the profiles

An invisible legion of suffering: the stories of children of priests

After the encounter, Douglas, who had been living in Madrid, returned to Spain and resumed her life. She exchanged letters with Inneo and, after running low on funds, decided to move to Buffalo to be near her friends. There, she quickly found a job as a music teacher and began an intimate relationship with the man who had charmed her in the Buffalo bar. When Inneo finally told her that he was a Catholic priest, she could hardly believe it.



Chiara Villar's father is a Catholic priest. "He hid me all his life and would ultimately get Alzheimer's and truly forget me," she said. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

"It was like a bad joke," Douglas said.

Inneo promised to leave the priesthood. Douglas, a working, single mother who had fled the Communist regime in her native Cuba, chose to believe him. She traveled the

short distance to Niagara Falls, Canada, where Inneo served as a priest, and moved into the church rectory. She said she worked as a housekeeper, played the organ during church funerals, and continued her intimate relationship with a man who had promised to live a life without sex.

All the while, Douglas said, Inneo pocketed the money she earned, promising to invest it in a better future — principally real estate — that they would share when he left the priesthood.

“ ‘Just give me a chance, just give me a chance,’ he always said,” Douglas recalled.

Douglas resolved to be patient, until she was faced with another surprise. “I got pregnant with Chiara,” she recalled. “It was a shock. I didn’t know what to do.”

She told Inneo, but he still wasn’t ready to leave the priesthood and she grew convinced he never would. She had met his domineering mother and other family members while posing as Inneo’s “friend” and felt certain his family’s religious beliefs and his own devotion to the clerical life were too strong to be set aside. She was sure he would never openly acknowledge he had fathered Chiara Villar.

The truth would have to remain their secret, a choice that, however generously intended, would prove damaging to Villar. “I said, ‘Your father is a secret and you have to keep it a secret.’ Because Anthony would deny he was her father and it would be hurtful to her,” Douglas told the Globe.

Her mother’s admonition could scarcely have been more confusing to Villar. Just before she started kindergarten, in the mid-1980s, she was told never to let anyone know that the man she knew as “Papi” was her dad. And if anyone asked, she was to tell them Inneo was her uncle.

Always a dutiful daughter, Villar took the instructions to heart, though it was impossible for her to understand why she had to lie — or to imagine the price she would later pay for living that lie.

“I don’t think either one of them understood the psychological trauma that telling me that I had to lie would cause,” Villar said.

Inneo had been a frequent visitor to the small apartment where Villar lived with her mother and her older sister. He delighted in lifting his daughter high in the air so she could reach for his nose, and he took hours of video of himself playing with his baby girl.

“I was the light of his world,” Villar said.

But the lie governed her life.

When her mother dropped the young girl off for a visit with her father at the rectory, Villar would sprint from her mother’s car to where Inneo was waiting by an open door. “I’d quickly run inside because I was afraid of anyone seeing me with my dad, because it was clear to me I was to hush up,” she said.

As she grew older, Villar occasionally played the rebellious teenager during these visits, lighting a cigarette or telling her father she was having sex, which wasn’t true, to spur his concern and remind him she needed his attention. For a few hours the act would work, until the visit drew to a close and her Papi once again became Father Inneo.

“Behind closed doors, he was my dad, but in an instant, when I walked out to my mom’s car, it was like, ‘OK, Chiara, God bless you.’ It was all so Dr. Jekyll and Mr.

Hyde,” Villar said.

The burden of secrecy never affected Villar’s grades at a local Catholic school. In fact, she was an A student and the prom queen. By all appearances, she was doing beautifully.

She wasn’t. Feeling guilty and unworthy of her father’s love, she punished herself in various ways, including regular cutting.

“I started to take the blame on myself. I started to contemplate whether I was even important enough to live. I started to cut myself because I loved this man so much,” Villar said.



Chiara Villar's birth and baptismal certificates.

In the 1990s, leaders of several women's religious orders issued a series of confidential reports to the Vatican saying that the sexual abuse of nuns by priests living in Africa and other parts of the developing world required immediate attention. One report described a 1988 incident in Malawi in which the local bishop dismissed leaders of a women's congregation after they complained that local priests had impregnated 29 sisters.

In the report, Sister Maura O'Donohue said she was aware of similar incidents in more than 20 countries, including the United States, Ireland, and Italy.

In another report, O'Donohue, a doctor with the Medical Missionaries of Mary, wrote that a leading African priest said "quite openly" that "celibacy in the African context means a priest does not get married but does not mean he does not have children."

According to the National Catholic Reporter, which reviewed the still-confidential reports and revealed their existence in 2001, the senior nuns who described the problem also provided documentation that in "a few extreme instances priests impregnated nuns and then encouraged them to have abortions."

But, as it did with early reports of clergy sexual abuse, the Holy See treated the pregnancies as an isolated phenomenon, rather than a sign of a widespread but hidden problem. "A few negative situations must not make us forget the often heroic faithfulness of the vast majority of monks, nuns, and priests," a Vatican spokesman said at the time.

Meanwhile, there were fresh accounts of priests who had fathered children. And the drumbeat of scandal grew louder, even as the church continued to treat each incident as an unfortunate exception.

Perhaps most famously, Eamonn Casey, a charismatic bishop in Galway, was forced to resign in 1992 following revelations that he had fathered a child with an American woman, Annie Murphy, who teamed up with a writer to publish a gushy book about their affair, "Forbidden Fruit."

Annie Murphy and her son, Peter, then 17 and living in Connecticut, became instant celebrities. "I talked to an Irish [reporter] in the morning and went to school and

thought, ‘OK, that will be it,’ ” Peter Murphy recently told the Globe. “But when I came home, I’d say there were more than 100 reporters slathering round our condo complex.”



Peter Murphy is the son of an Irish bishop. His mother, Annie Murphy, wrote of her love affair with Eamonn Casey in the book "Forbidden Fruit." SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

A stream of similar scandals followed Casey’s downfall, each publicly treated as an outlier:

- In 2006, a Mexican priest, the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, was forced to resign and relinquish his position as leader of the influential religious order the Legionaries of Christ after formal charges by the church that he sexually abused seminarians. In 2009, a year after his death, the order disclosed that Maciel had fathered several

children by at least two women.

■ In 2009, the president of Paraguay, Fernando Lugo, acknowledged he was the father of a 2-year-old boy who was conceived while Lugo was a Catholic bishop. The mother said that Lugo began the affair when she was 16 and studying for her confirmation.

■ In 2012, the popular Los Angeles bishop Gabino Zavala quietly resigned after revealing to church officials that he was the father of two teenage children who were living with their mother in another state. The archdiocese said it would offer the mother support, including help with college expenses.

There are many more. Anecdotal evidence is so abundant, in fact, that at least one noted Catholic scholar believes the children of priests may outnumber the victims of clergy sexual abuse. In the United States alone, more than 18,500 people have alleged they were victims of clergy sexual abuse since 1950, according to information gathered by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and reviewed by the Globe.

‘Celibacy is a difficult bar for a young man to overcome to become priest, so young men who do overcome that bar are going to be the most highly committed.’

D. Paul Sullins, a priest and sociologist at The Catholic University of America, said his belief that priests with children may be more numerous than priests who abuse children is based on common sense: “It’s a much less common impulse for an adult

male to want to have sex with a child than it is to have sex with a woman.”

Sullins, who has a wife and children, is one of about 125 Catholic priests in the United States who were permitted to remain married after serving as clergy in the Episcopal Church and converting to Catholicism.

Yet in his recent book, “Keeping the Vow: The Untold Story of Married Catholic Priests,” Sullins favors maintaining the celibacy requirement.

“Celibacy is a difficult bar for a young man to overcome to become priest, so young men who do overcome that bar are going to be the most highly committed young men,” he said in an interview. “I think that has tremendous advantages for the church.”



Jim Graham, who believes he is the son of a Catholic priest, in his home with his father's crucifix on the table. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Finding the answer would not be easy because “the principals,” as his aunt called them, were dead. Sullivan had died in March 1993, according to the obituary his aunt showed him. And Graham’s mother, Helen, had died the previous November.

But Graham soon learned that there might be documents that told the story. He learned from a close friend of his mother’s that she had moved from the Buffalo area to Manhattan with Jim when he was still a toddler.

There, she entrusted him to the care of a Catholic orphanage, the New York Foundling Hospital, and took a nursing job at a Queens hospital.

When Graham received his records from the orphanage, he felt he’d struck gold: A cover letter referred to John Graham, the Buffalo gas station owner who had raised him, as his stepfather. And the records referred to Jim Graham as an “o.w. child,” or a child born out of wedlock.

He was not John Graham’s son after all.

The records, more than 30 typed pages covering the year 1947, indicated that Helen Graham had hoped to gain sole legal custody of Jim Graham as well as two older sisters, both fathered by John Graham and still living in Buffalo. The records referred to a sympathetic “alleged father” of young Jim Graham living nearby and said that Helen Graham was so fearful that her husband would discover her whereabouts that she was going by her maiden name, Helen O’Connell.



A family photo showed Jim Graham with his mother, Helen Graham, at Rockaway Beach in New York in 1947, when he was a full-time resident of the Foundling Hospital, an orphanage. SOCIOLOGAS - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

She had good reason to fear: John Graham was planning to divorce his errant wife and win legal custody of all three children. He soon headed to New York City to gather evidence that Helen was having an affair.

A transcript of their divorce proceedings, which a detective agency located for Jim Graham, shows that in the early morning hours of July 29, 1947, John Graham, his brother Otto Graham, a friend, and several private investigators went to an apartment at 332 W. 45th St., where they believed John Graham's wife was staying. After persuading the superintendent to give them a key to room number 5, they barged in on

an unsuspecting couple.

“When you walked into the room what did you see?” the judge in the divorce case asked Otto Graham, the elderly uncle Jim would later confront at his breakfast table.

“We saw a man getting out of bed. He was unclothed. He was just slipping on a pair of pants,” Otto Graham answered.

“What else did you see in the room?” the judge asked.

“We found Mrs. Graham in the room. She was just getting out of bed and putting a smock on,” Otto Graham answered.

“Did you know the man?” the judge asked Otto Graham.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Where did you know the man from?” the judge asked.

“From Buffalo,” Otto Graham said.

That was all he was asked to say, but it was enough: John Graham won full custody of all three children. After that, Helen O’Connell made yearly visits to Buffalo to see Jim Graham and his two older sisters.

The fate of her lover was scarcely less bleak. Jim Graham obtained some of Sullivan’s personnel records from the Eastern Province of the Oblates in Washington, D.C., and they told the story of a priest facing an emotional crisis after something “serious” happened in Buffalo around the time Jim Graham was born.

First, Sullivan was transferred from Holy Angels Church in Buffalo to the Oblate College in Newburg, N.Y., on or before Jan. 1, 1947, about the time Jim Graham's mother left for New York City. The transfer was made, the records say, "to protect him and save him" from "a serious occasion."

A month later, however, Sullivan departed the college without leaving a forwarding address, saying he did not intend to return. "I have heard that he wishes to be left strictly alone and that he is through with the Oblates," one notation said.

'I look so much like my father. I must have been a constant reminder of the man who took his wife away.'

Still, it wasn't long before Sullivan had a change of heart. The records show that just two months after John and Otto Graham caught Helen Graham in bed with her lover, Sullivan attempted to return to the life of a priest.

It would not be easy. The Oblates suspended many of his privileges, and, for the next 16 years, Sullivan lived on the grounds of a retreat and religious shrine in upstate New York, translating religious texts and performing menial tasks.

Eventually, after Sullivan was deemed "rehabilitated," and after completing assignments in Georgia, Nebraska, and Ohio, he returned to the Lowell area, where he had attended the local schools, and moved into the Oblate Infirmary in Tewksbury. He died there in 1993 after what his obituary describes as "a long illness."

Jim Graham still visits Sullivan's grave in the small cemetery on the infirmary grounds. He now thinks he understands why his stepfather, John Graham, treated him so indifferently.

"I look so much like my father," Graham said. "I must have been a constant reminder of the man who took his wife away."

Today, Graham is seeking official confirmation from the Oblate order in Rome that Sullivan was his father, but to no avail. The Globe attempted to interview officials in the Oblate order, but requests delivered through mail and e-mail remain unanswered.

"I have tenaciously and respectfully approached the church, all the way to Rome, to tell me the truth," Graham said. "So far, they have not cooperated."



Jim Graham visited the grave of the man he believes was his father, the Rev. Thomas S. Sullivan, in Tewksbury. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

THE CHURCH'S FAILURE to act in his case with either candor or mercy left Jim Graham one painful step short of a certain answer to the question that drove him for so long. More painful still was that he would never have a chance to try to forge a relationship with Father Sullivan, dead by the time Graham began his quest. He will never know whether Sullivan would have embraced or shunned him, his secret child.

Many other children of priests do get that chance, but often find frustration and sorrow in the effort to build a paternal bond. Of the sons and daughters of priests interviewed by the Globe, no one tried harder to win a father's love than Chiara Villar.

After making regular visits to the Rev. Anthony Inneo's home with her partner, Jason, Inneo was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. And when Inneo's family moved him to a home for the elderly without telling her, Villar was heartbroken.

But Villar eventually found her father's address, and, when she visited him, her father no longer recognized her. She showed him photos of his two granddaughters on her phone and told him that they loved him. Then, Villar bade her Papi a final farewell.

"He hid me all his life and would ultimately get Alzheimer's and truly forget me," she said.



Share your story

The Spotlight Team wants to hear your personal stories of connections to children of priests. If you'd prefer a more confidential way to get in touch, please [visit our tips page for more information.](#)

Tipline: [617-929-7483](tel:617-929-7483)

Michael Rezendes can be reached at michael.rezendes@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@MikeRezendes](https://twitter.com/MikeRezendes).

Additional video footage by Taylor de Lench/Globe Staff

[Show 125 comments](#)

©2021 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC

FATHER, MY FATHER

A priest's son takes his case directly to the Pope

By Michael Rezendes | Photos by Suzanne Kreiter Globe Staff, August 17, 2017, 2:00 a.m.



Vincent Doyle paused at an overlook above the River Shannon in 2016. Doyle used to visit the same spot with the Rev. John J. Doyle, before Vincent Doyle knew the priest was his father. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF



This is the final story in a two-part series.
[Click here to read part one.](#)



Unlike most of those standing in the searing Roman sun, Doyle was headed to a front-row seat in a reserved section very close to where the pope would emerge, and he was already silently rehearsing an urgent message in the pontiff's native language.

"I am the son of a Catholic priest in Ireland," he repeated in Spanish, praying he would not become tongue-tied or overcome with emotion when he met the Holy Father.

ADVERTISING

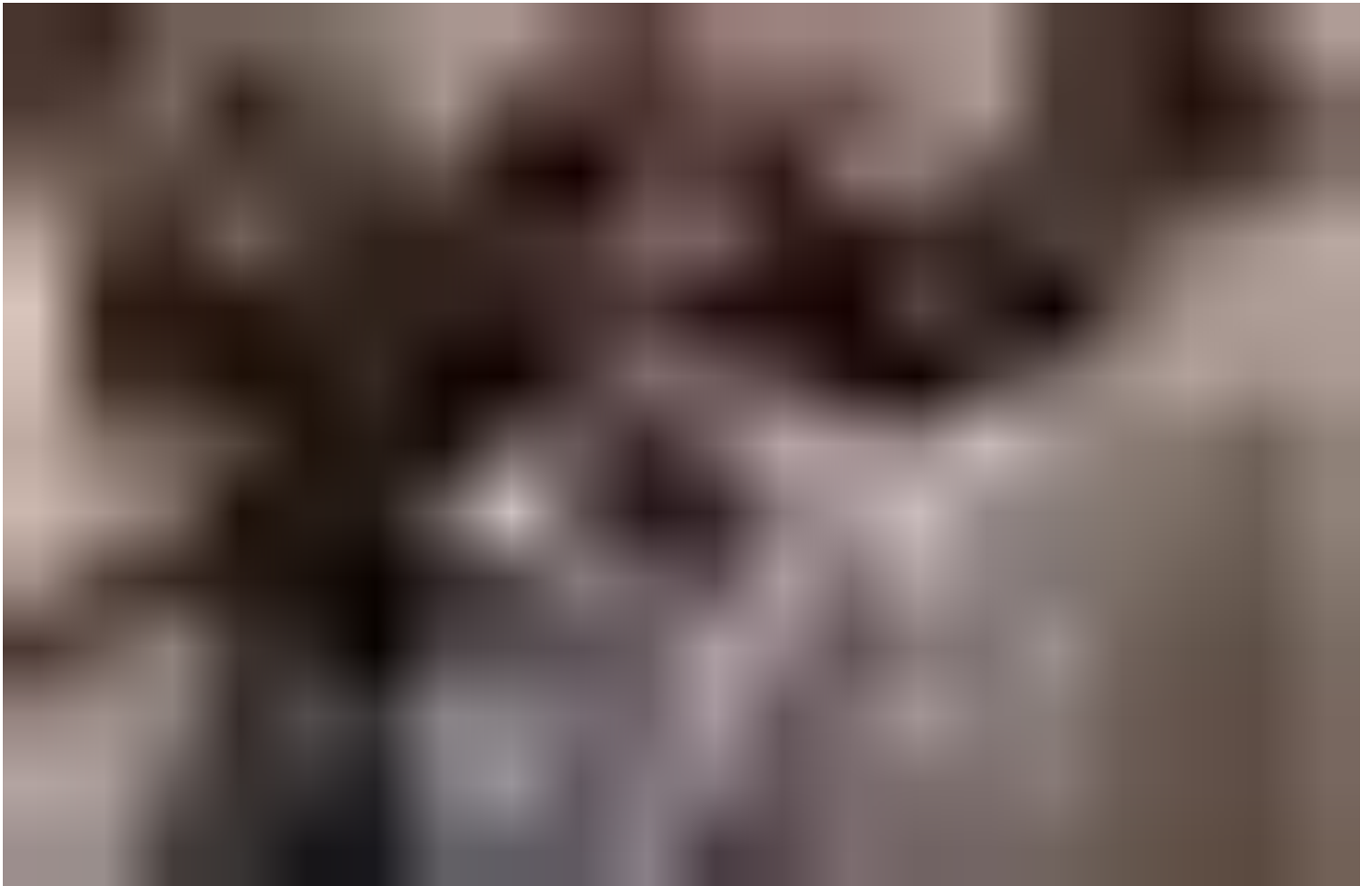
Doyle learned at the age of 28 that the beloved godfather he grew up calling “J.J.” — a Catholic priest from a rural diocese in central Ireland — was, in fact, his biological father.

J.J. had died years before, leaving Doyle with many unanswered questions. But, after discovering his true father and meeting a woman whose father was also a Catholic priest, one question in particular would drive him: Just how many children of Catholic clergy are there?

Though there had been notorious scandals in the 1990s involving Irish clergy who fathered children, there was little reliable information on the larger subject of priests and their offspring, Doyle found. So he came up with his own solution: He built a website he called [Coping International](#) and invited anyone who was the daughter or son of a priest to contact him.

Soon, he was hearing from dozens of people living in countries throughout the world, many of whom had suffered psychologically, or financially, while growing up without a caring father. And as they spoke to one another through a private Facebook forum, a community began to emerge, a community that may number in the thousands.

Now, sitting in his front-row seat at the Vatican, Doyle gripped a Spanish translation of a letter he had written to a conference of Irish bishops, who would be meeting the following Monday to consider addressing the needs of the children of priests. He wanted the pope to have a copy — and a reminder that it was time, past time, for the church to finally act.



Vincent Doyle kissed the ring of Pope Francis in June 2014. VINCENT DOYLE

Then, Pope Francis appeared. The crowd roared. And for a moment Doyle felt as if he were at a Rolling Stones concert.

When the Holy Father approached, Doyle did not flinch. He kissed the pope's fisherman's ring, introduced himself in Spanish, and stood by as Francis placed an arm around his shoulder and appeared to be reading the first paragraph of the letter that shared Doyle's story and his hopes.

“He had a deep, sincere look on his face,” Doyle recalled. “Then he held the letter to his heart and said, ‘Si, si, I will read.’ The last thing I said to him was, ‘You have until Monday!’ ”

Borgia was perhaps the most notorious of at least four popes known to have fathered children over a 100-year span during the Renaissance, even drawing what the Catholic Encyclopedia calls “a scathing letter of reproof” from another pope for misconduct “so notorious as to shock the whole town and court.” His infamous lifestyle fueled outrage that helped trigger the Protestant Reformation, the great religious upheaval in which emerging Protestant leaders offered many complaints about church practice, including that celibacy was an unnatural requirement and an invitation to hypocrisy, like Borgia’s.

“The pope has as little power to command (celibacy) as he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement of the bowels or growing fat,” said Martin Luther, the German theologian who incited the Protestant revolt.

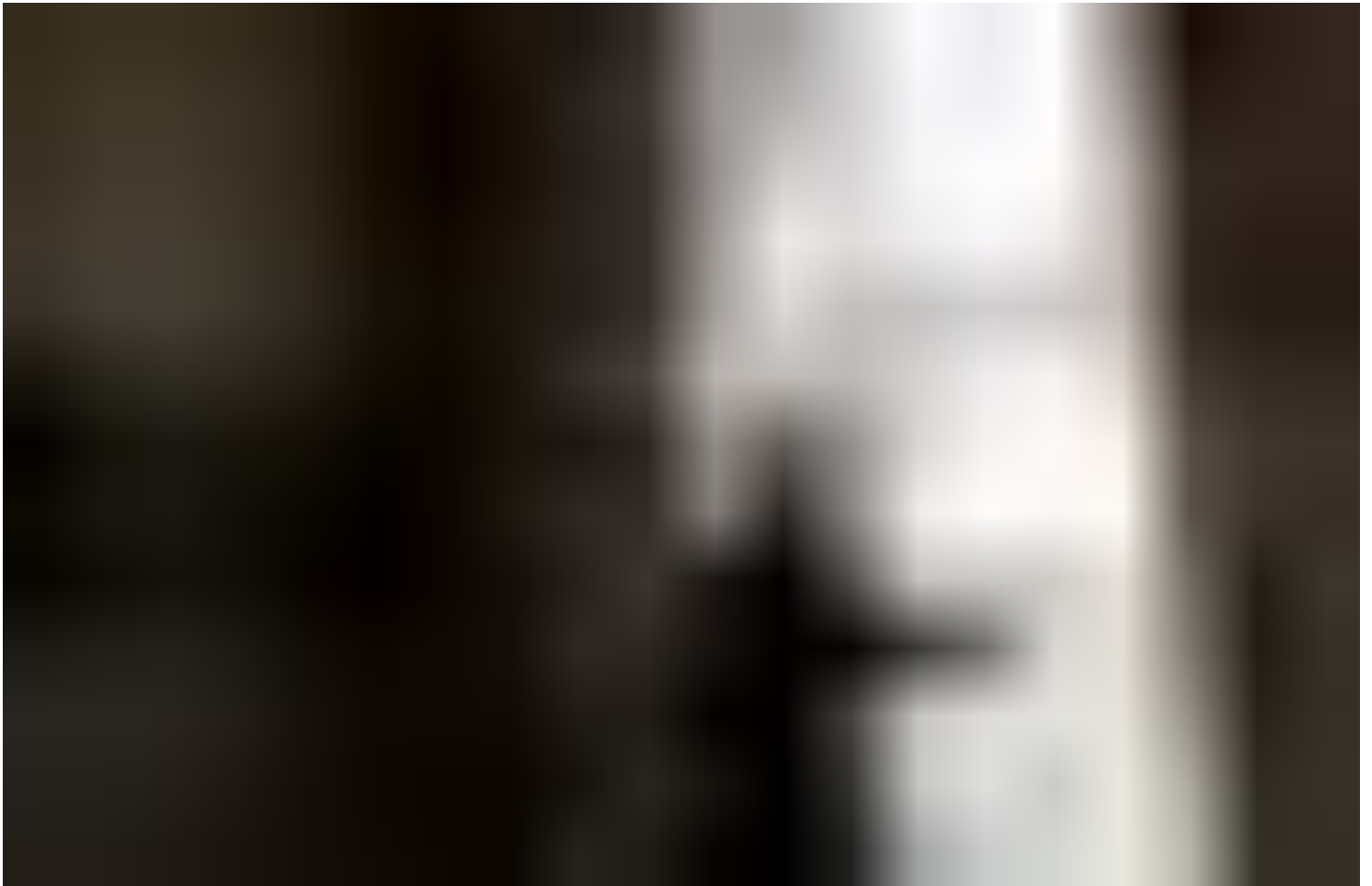
Church leaders nonetheless reacted by affirming celibacy at the Council of Trent in 1563, and they have never wavered through the centuries. Even during the liberal 1960s, when many priests hoped they would soon be allowed to marry, Pope Paul VI disappointed them by reaffirming priestly celibacy, calling it “a brilliant jewel” and a cherished way of life intended to help priests dedicate themselves as completely as possible to the church and the people it serves.

And so Cardinal Sean P. O’Malley, the archbishop of Boston, was being true to this long tradition earlier this year when he praised celibacy during a special Mass at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in which priests renewed their vows of ordination. O’Malley said he found it “difficult to imagine the face of the church today if we had not had a host of men and women throughout the ages who renounced home, spouse, and children for the sake of the children of heaven.”

But church officials have been less eager to formally address a painful byproduct of its

commitment to priestly celibacy: the children who are sometimes conceived when priests stray. Although the children of Renaissance popes may have lived in luxury, the children of priests today often have nowhere to turn. While some quietly receive financial support from their fathers' bishops, many others are dependent on their priestly father to decide how much time and money to devote to their well-being, while he conceals the fact that he's become a parent. Only in rare circumstances have mothers braved public scrutiny and sued for child support.

‘Fundamentally, a child has a right to know their father and the father has fundamental obligations towards his son or daughter.’



Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said bishops can require priests to honor their financial and emotional obligations to their children. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

The Code of Canon Law, the internal system of laws, regulations, and principles the church uses to govern the Catholic world, is entirely silent on the subject, leaving bishops whose priests father children without formal guidance, and consigning many of the children to lives of secrecy, unmet needs, and shame.

A few Catholic leaders have publicly called for the church to address the issue. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, who provided funds to help Doyle launch Coping International, said bishops can require priests to honor their financial and emotional obligations to their children — and they should.

“Fundamentally, a child has a right to know their father and the father has

fundamental obligations towards his son or daughter,” Martin explained.

And the conference of Irish bishops recently approved a set of guidelines requiring every priest who fathers a child to “face up to his responsibilities — personal, legal, moral, and financial.”

O’Malley, a key adviser to Pope Francis and head of the pope’s advisory commission on protecting minors, declined repeated requests for an interview to discuss the church’s responsibility to the children of priests.

He did, however, issue a [statement](#) saying that any priest who fathers a child has “a moral obligation to step aside from ministry and provide for the care and needs of the mother and the child.”

O’Malley said the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which he leads, has decided it will not address the needs of children of priests.

“After careful consideration of this important issue, it was judged to be beyond the Commission’s mandate,” O’Malley said. “The Commission determined to refer this issue to the Holy See for further review.”

One former member of the commission said O’Malley’s statement represented a retreat on the issue. Marie Collins of Ireland said that O’Malley and other commission members last year supported her call to investigate the needs of children of priests by sending letters to church officials to determine current policies and procedures.

“I am disappointed” at the reversal, said Collins, who resigned from the commission in March to protest what she saw as the Vatican’s resistance to reform. “If a child is fathered by a Catholic priest and he is not fulfilling his parental duty to that minor,

then surely the church cannot also abdicate its responsibility for the welfare of that child.”



900 years of celibacy... and children

The Catholic church has forbidden priests to marry and have families since 1139, but that hasn't stopped them from having children.





Doyle believes he will ultimately succeed, largely because he's tackling the issue from inside, not outside, the church. "I'm doing this because I love Catholicism," he said. "I just don't like the fact that my faith is being used to keep the children of priests a secret."

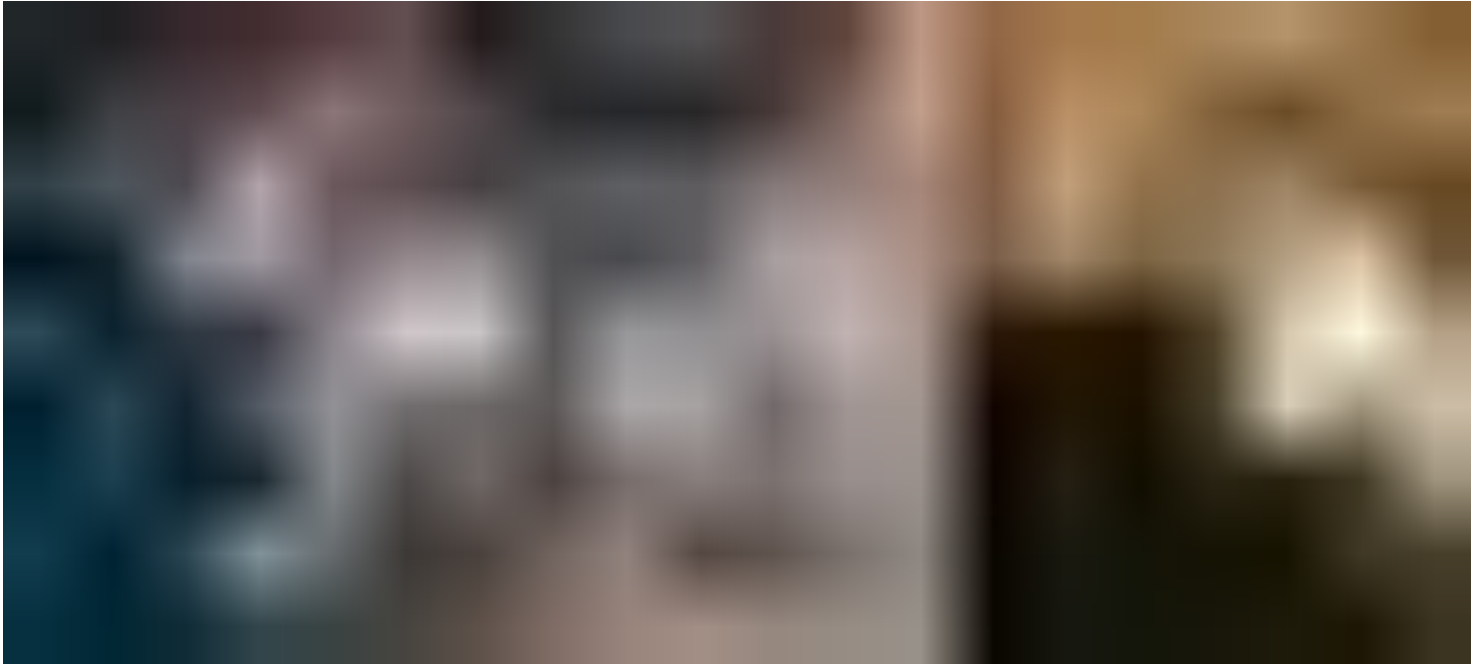
As a teenager, Doyle often felt troubled for reasons he could never quite identify. He felt a strong connection to the church, and the priesthood, but wasn't sure how to act on that inner pull. He even enrolled in a seminary in Spain, only to return to Ireland a year later.

"This confusion usurped all of my attention to the point that all I knew was that I was somehow connected to the priesthood," he said.

Doyle also believed that his inner turmoil had been triggered by the death of his godfather, the Rev. John J. Doyle, when Vincent was only 12 years old.

As a boy, Doyle was especially close to J.J., as the priest was often called, spending nearly every weekend with him. From time to time, they would stop at a park

overlooking the River Shannon. There, they'd take a walk or kick a soccer ball around before sharing a picnic lunch.



Family photos of the Rev. John J. Doyle, the priest who was the father of Vincent Doyle, and of young Vincent Doyle with his father, whom he knew as J.J. SUZANNE KREITER

“It was all very magical,” Doyle recalled.

Even as a toddler, he was powerfully drawn to J.J., his mother recalled. She would put her little son in the aisle at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Arva and watch as he crawled up to the altar where the Rev. Doyle was saying Mass. The priest would pick up the little boy and place him near him, and the child would watch quietly as his godfather completed the liturgy.

“I just loved him so much,” Doyle said.

When the Rev. Doyle died of lung cancer in 1995, Doyle felt an absence he was never able to fill.

Then one summer evening in 2011, while visiting his mother, he happened upon a

folder of old poems in a drawer. Instantly, he recognized his godfather's handwriting.

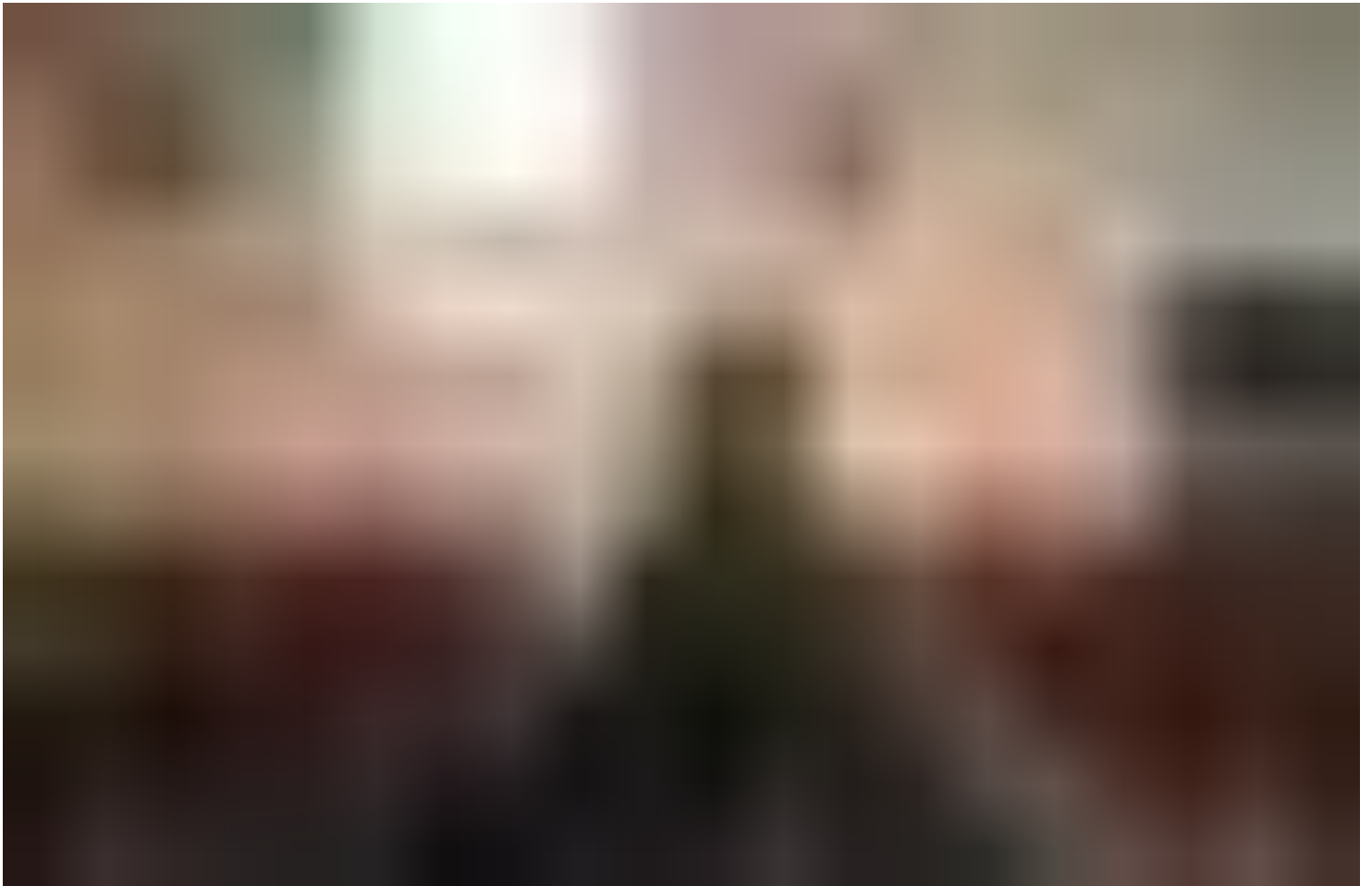
“As I was reading the poems, something came to me, like a clearing,” Doyle said. “I recognized a tone, a diction like my own.” Then Doyle turned to his mother, sitting in the kitchen. “I looked at her and said, ‘He was my father, wasn’t he?’ And a tear hit her eye.”

All at once, a mystery was solved. His mother's husband, the kindly man who raised Doyle, was not his biological father at all; J.J. was.

“Being told who I was — that was essentially the answer,” said Doyle, who eventually changed his surname, Finn, to the name of his father. “I wasn't mad. I had been right all along.”

Soon, Doyle was studying part time to become a psychotherapist. When, by coincidence, he met a woman who told him she was the daughter of a Catholic priest, he conceived the idea of the support group he would found, Coping International. His goal was to make his and others' hidden hurt known to the world — and challenge the church to make a place for them.

“I thought I was unique. I thought I was unusual,” Doyle said. “I was wrong.”



Vincent Doyle at St. Mary's in Edgeworthstown, Ireland, one of the churches where his father served as a priest. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Doyle was motivated in his one-man campaign not only by the pain of his personal experience but also by the hostile reaction of some family members to the news that he had a different biological father than his mother's three other children. Their distress, Doyle said, had less to do with the family's embarrassment than with the way Doyle's true father's actions reflected on the church.

"I personify and embody the exact opposite of what has been promulgated by the church for centuries," he said. It was a reaction that Doyle said filled him with "anger, fury."

"It was this experience of rejection and abandonment that was my first witness to

stigma against children of priests,” he said. “I felt so hurt, so let down,” adding that only his mother stood by him.

As an advocate, however, Doyle has tried to avoid letting his anger show and sidesteps unnecessary fights. That’s why he avoids taking a stand on the hot-button issue of priestly celibacy, even though many of the children of priests who have contacted him are convinced that the requirement is unnatural and lies at the heart of their suffering.

“If the pope walked in the door right now and said we’re going to get rid of celibacy, I’d say great. But that would not deal with the issue at hand, which is what to do about the children of priests today and in the near term,” he said.

Later, when she was 20, her father erased any lingering doubt about their connection: She nearly died from a fall while on vacation in the Canary Islands, and her father declined to come to her bedside.

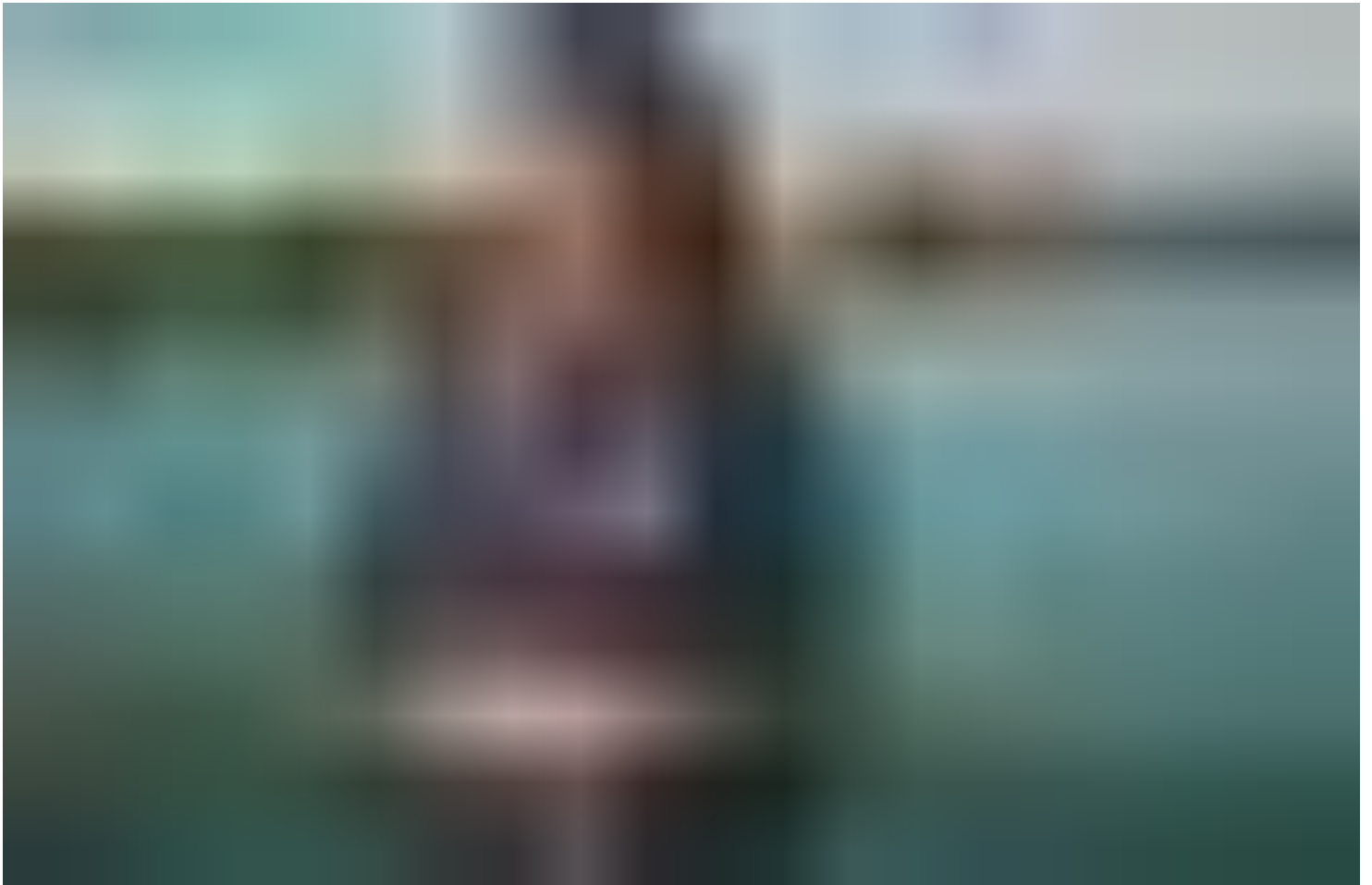
“I think I’d always felt guilty, that it was my fault, that I had sort of scuppered his life by being born because I was such an annoyance that had to be hidden,” she told the Globe.

When she contacted Doyle through his website, she told him that her father had pressured her mother into keeping his identity a secret — even from his daughter — by threatening to withhold child support payments if she ever told anyone he had fathered a child.

Doyle thought the church owed Thomas an apology, or at least the opportunity to share her story. So he contacted Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the archbishop of Westminster, who oversaw Thomas's father, and asked for a meeting.

Nichols agreed. And when Thomas told Doyle she was worried about another cold encounter, Doyle assured her he'd accompany her to meeting.

It proved to be a turning point.



Sarah Thomas found out at age 12 that her father was a priest. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Nichols, who is also president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, was contrite on behalf of the church and later wrote Thomas a letter of apology. He said her father should have informed his bishop when she was conceived and, if he

had, he would not have been allowed to complete his training as a priest.

“I express my deep regret for so much that followed from that error of judgment, particularly the sense of rejection which you have experienced over many years,” wrote Nichols in the March 17, 2016, letter.

Despite the deep hurt she felt, Thomas told Nichols she did not want her father sanctioned in any way, in part because she believes he has been a good priest and in part because she feels the celibacy requirement is really to blame for his failings — and her sorrow. Nichols, she said, abided by her wish.

Thomas would later write a book about her experience as the daughter of a priest, “Dying to be Free,” under the pseudonym Hannah Robinson. And she’s been accepted by a PhD program at The Open University, outside London, where she plans to study the use of social media by the children of priests as they build a new community.



St. Mary's in Edgeworthstown, Ireland. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

THE POPE MISSED the deadline Vincent Doyle set.

Three years after his encounter with Pope Francis, Doyle has yet to hear back from the Vatican. And his letters, phone calls, and e-mail to American prelates — including O'Malley — have largely fallen on deaf ears.

But in Ireland, a predominantly Catholic country hit especially hard by revelations of clerical sex abuse, Martin and other Irish bishops have been eager to hear Doyle out and to take up his cause.

“I expected a fight. I expected doors closing. But they just welcomed it,” said Doyle.

They also, rare among those in the church hierarchy, welcomed questions from the

press.

Archbishop Martin, an outspoken supporter of clergy abuse survivors, agreed to a taped interview with the Globe without asking for questions in advance. And over the course of an hour, he expressed his support for the rights of the children of priests, frankly discussed the difficulties posed by managing priests who father children, and noted the lack of any guidelines in canon law.

“One solution is he marries the girl,” Martin said, which would mean the priest would have to give up his job. He added the same would be likely be true “if the relationship between the priest and somebody was an abusive one . . . a person like that, you know it’s very hard to see how they belong in the priesthood.”

Read the profiles

An invisible legion of suffering: the stories of children of priests

Three months ago, on May 29, the Irish Episcopal Conference, the confederation of Irish bishops, showed Doyle that his efforts have not been in vain when it approved its “Principles of Responsibility Regarding Priests Who Father Children While in Ministry.”

While the five principles do not require Irish bishops to discipline these errant priests and do not require priests who father children to leave the priesthood, they clearly

state that the primary duty of a cleric with a daughter or a son must be to care for his child and to “face up to his responsibilities — personal, legal, moral, and financial.”

The Vatican has yet to respond, but it seems unlikely the Holy See would do anything to weaken the principles because Pope Francis has appeared to take an even harder line — similar to O’Malley’s — saying at one point that he would be inclined to tell a priest who fathered a daughter or a son that “he must leave his priestly ministry and take care of his child.”

Pope Francis made this comment in a book, “On Heaven and Earth,” which he wrote when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, then known as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, with Rabbi Abraham Skorka. In the book, Bergoglio says he could imagine situations in which a priest who fathers a child could be allowed to remain in ministry, if he expresses remorse. But he makes clear the priest’s first responsibility would be to his child, not the church.

“Natural law comes before his right as a priest,” Bergoglio says.



Vincent Doyle and Sarah Thomas walked the beach at Galway Bay in Ireland. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Doyle, while he has cheered the set of principles approved by the Irish bishops, believes it is essential for the Vatican to adopt something similar, so the rights of the children of priests can be affirmed and protected by dioceses around the world.

He shrugged off the news that O'Malley's commission on protecting children has decided to refer the matter of the children of priests to the Holy See.

"The Vatican running away from an issue is hardly news," he said.

Over the last few years, Doyle said, O'Malley has declined to respond to several letters, including one that he personally delivered to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross while visiting Boston earlier this year.

On that day, Doyle even attempted to meet with O'Malley by appearing unannounced at the archdiocesan Braintree offices with his wife, Emer, on a rainy day in April. Although staffers invited him in and heard Doyle out, O'Malley did not meet with him, much less embrace him as Pope Francis did that sunny morning in Vatican city.

But Doyle said O'Malley hasn't seen the last of him.

“What if you went through life and you didn't do anything?” he said, when asked to explain his persistence. “What if you went through life and didn't try to help your fellow man?”



Share your story

The Spotlight Team wants to hear your personal stories of connections to children of priests. If you'd prefer a more confidential way to get in touch, please [visit our tips page for more information](#).

Tipline: [617-929-7483](tel:617-929-7483)

Michael Rezendes can be reached at michael.rezendes@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@MikeRezendes](https://twitter.com/MikeRezendes).

[Show 65 comments](#)

©2021 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC