

She can't forgive Mahony's inaction

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Mary Dispenza Esfahan was 7 when her parish priest raped her in the auditorium of the Catholic school she attended in East Los Angeles, she recalls. At the time, her mother, who worked in the parish, was chatting with kitchen workers in the next room.

Eventually, Dispenza became a nun and a teacher at her old school, St. Alphonsus, often meeting with students in the auditorium where she remembers being molested. It was 43 years before Dispenza allowed herself to release repressed memories and confront what had happened in that room. The priest was George Neville Rucker, who has been accused of molesting 38 girls.

"To face the abuse would have caused me to face the church that I loved, the work that I loved, the faith that I loved," Dispenza said in a recent interview.

Eventually, she confronted Rucker, and Friday the Archdiocese of Los Angeles agreed to settle Dispenza's claims against the church -- and 44 others -- for \$60 million. An earlier report by the archdiocese "confirmed prior allegations" of molestation by Rucker. Dispenza expects to receive about \$1.33 million.

Now 67, she was in first grade when the molestation began. In a class photo, she is one of 40 pupils, each wearing a fresh white dress, each captured with palms pressed together, fingers pointing heavenward.

After the first attack, she recalled, she went into a small bathroom off the auditorium. There, she washed her hands.

"I thought in my own little way if I washed my hands, I'd be clean again," she said. It was the start of what she came to call the "split," the blocking of awful memories. "I think that's where the split happened. I think I left little Mary in the bathroom. I went back to where my mom and the women were and never told anybody."

At school, Rucker was always there, sullyng events that should have brought solace or joy. One of those twisted moments was her confirmation, when the young are formally inducted into church membership.

"It was the moment of confirmation when I looked up on the altar, when I saw Father Rucker was up there ... and I had to go to him," she said. "I wanted to get out of church, I wanted to

run away, but I could not, I could not. He was taking away that sacramental moment."

Indeed, she did not leave her church. She joined the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, pouring herself into her work as an educator in Catholic schools, including St. Alphonsus. The work, she sees now, was also an escape.

"I don't think I knew what I was doing at that time," she said. "It is interesting the detachment or the disassociation. I could stand in front of all those children in an assembly in the very hall where I was abused and never, never let that in. I think that's the only way I could survive."

Although she gave up holy orders in 1973, she remained a Catholic educator, first as teacher, then as principal at St. Alphonsus and then at schools in Washington state.

A promotion in 1989 to an executive post in church administration in Seattle opened the floodgates of memory. The church required all new employees to attend a seminar on sexual abuse.

"That's when I really woke up, that the light went on that I had been abused and I wanted and needed to take care of it somehow, to face the abuser," Dispenza said. Two years later, she arranged a face-to-face meeting with Rucker, who, she said, admitted molesting her and offered her \$25,000.

"I asked him if he ever abused other little girls, and he said no," she said. "I carried that belief for a long time. He said it was because of his hormones."

The 38 molestations Rucker was accused of -- Dispenza was the first victim -- occurred from 1947 to 1980. Rucker, now 86, was criminally charged in 2002 with 29 counts of molesting seven girls in Los Angeles during the 1970s.

But in 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a California law extending the statute of limitations on sexual crimes against children.

The law's aim had been to allow the prosecution of cases that occurred when the victims were young and possibly too terrified to report the abuse. With the high court's action, the criminal case against Rucker dissolved, along with 10 others.

Rucker, who was barred from public ministry in 2002, paid Dispenza \$25,000 to cover the counseling she needed for years.

“Looking back, I was naive,” she said. “I almost felt sorry -- poor man. He said I just happened to be the little girl in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Rucker said he went to a counselor once. [The counselor] said, ‘You don’t need to worry about this. You’re going to forget about it. She’s going to forget about it.’ “

Ten years later, when she learned that others alleged that Rucker had molested them, she joined litigation against the archdiocese.

“Of course, I feel a sense of gratitude that it’s done,” she said of the settlement, adding that she sympathizes with 500 alleged victims who have yet to receive compensation. “It angers me somewhat.”

She says she’s forgiven Rucker -- “He’s sick, he’s a pedophile” -- and “I can forgive the church.” But she can’t forgive Cardinal Roger M. Mahony.

She said she wrote to Mahony two years ago and has yet to receive a response. “I’d like to tell him what this meant for me. I’d like to tell him how he’s hurting the church,” she said.

Dispenza has retired and is living in Seattle. She said there are long periods of her life of which she has no recollection.

She credits her faith for helping her survive. She liberally quotes Viktor Emil Frankl, a Viennese doctor who survived German concentration camps, and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Their writings inspired her, allowing her to find “the pearls” within difficult and painful experiences.

“I found my own personal pearl. Because of the shame, I knew it was so wrong, I couldn’t tell anyone. So I talked to God,” she said simply. “The little pearl for me was the development of a strong connection to God as a person I could speak to, tell anything to, who already knew. That was a saving grace. I would believe.”

john.spano@latimes.com

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John Spano

Times Staff Writer

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