

Opinion: Raw realities of 'Spotlight'

By Kristin Gilger

If your son is a priest and your daughter a journalist, "Spotlight" is a jarring movie.

There are journalists and lawyers aplenty in this recently released movie about the Boston Globe's investigation of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, but hardly any priests.

I went to see "Spotlight" to cheer for the journalists. I'm a long-time journalist and journalism professor who raised a daughter who is an investigative reporter. But I'm also the mother of a Catholic priest. And that made "Spotlight" very difficult to watch indeed.

My son, Patrick, joined the Jesuit order of Catholic priests nearly 12 years ago, a decision that startled us then and still has the power to unsettle us now.

Both my husband and I were raised Catholic. We were married in the church and had our three children baptized Catholic, but when Patrick was 7, we left, unable to reconcile our personal beliefs with church teachings on everything from birth control to women.

That might have been the end of it but for the Jesuits. When Patrick started his studies at Jesuit-run Creighton University in Omaha, he didn't know what to think of the Jesuits. Who were these men who seemed so worldly and so otherworldly at the same time? They could probe philosophy one minute and dissect basketball scores the next. And they were rebels and reformers: They wanted to change the world.

The risk, the radicalism of it all, appealed to Patrick. These

were not men who settled for comfortable lives in suburbia. It made Patrick think of the Paul Simon song "Obvious Child" about a man who chooses a conventional life of fun, money and even love, but finds no meaning in it.

"Who wants to be like everyone else?" he asked.

Since joining the Jesuits after college, my son has been stretched in just about every way imaginable. For three years, he lived and worked on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, one of the poorest communities in the U.S. He has been sent into one of the nation's worst public housing projects, to a remote parish on the edge of a jungle in India, and to a women's prison in San Francisco. In such places, he has tested the limits of what he can—and cannot—do.

I'm proud of my son and his work, but I'm cautious about telling people he's a priest. I'm afraid of the question I see in their eyes. "No, he's not a child molester," I want to tell them.

Still, I can't really blame them for wondering. It is estimated that there were more than 10,000 victims of sexual abuse at the hands of Catholic priests around the world from 1950 to 2002.

When I point out to Patrick the all-too-obvious flaws in the church, he agrees with me. The church is sinful, he says. It's a human institution—so how could it not be?

Patrick believes the Catholic Church, with all its failings, still offers the best option: a moral code built on emulating the way Jesus lived and seeking meaning beyond comfort and self-affirmation. And Pope Francis, the first Jesuit to lead the church, has made it somewhat easier for us tenuous Catholics to realign ourselves with the church.

But not even Pope Francis can alter the past, something I kept thinking as "Spotlight" came to a close. There's an awful

moment when the names of hundreds of cities scroll across the screen, every one of them places where priests were found to have abused children. My husband and I sat slumped in our seats long after that stark and damning list had faded away.

Later, in the car, my husband and I agreed that “Spotlight” is a great movie. It doesn’t glamorize journalism and doesn’t exploit the stories of those who have been abused. That makes it, even more devastating, especially for Catholics and those like me who have been feeling more hopeful about the church.

My son just called to talk about plans for Christmas vacation. He’ll be home for a week, and wants to see a movie or two. I told him we should go see “Spotlight” together, but now I’m hoping he has forgotten the suggestion. If it was hard for my husband and me to watch the movie, how much more so would it be for him?

I think we’ll go to “Star Wars” instead.

Kristin Gilger is the associate dean of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. She has written a memoir about the Catholic Church and her son’s vocation, which is **excerpted here**. She wrote this for Zocalo Public Square.