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## Abuse Victim Speaks

Man Seeks Data on Priests from Catholic Bishop

By Jill Bryce  
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ALBANY - Curtis Oathout says he is tired of keeping quiet.

His childhood scarred by repeated sexual abuse by at least one Catholic priest, Oathout, now 39, says he hopes that telling his story publicly will help other victims come forward with their own stories, and demand answers from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany.

The diocese has confirmed allegations of sex abuse by 11 priests and paid more than \$2.3 million in confidential settlements to 11 victims of sexual abuse, including Oathout and two of his brothers.

Oathout is pushing for new legislation that would require mandatory reporting in clergy sex abuse cases and would also extend the statute of limitations in criminal prosecutions and civil cases, which he said would help provide healing and justice to victims of past abuse.

"I won't hide the diocese's secrets anymore. I can't hide their secrets," Oathout said in a recent one-on-one interview.

"Victims lose their childhood, which has a devastating effect on adulthood," said Oathout. "It affects everything I can imagine. You put it on a shelf. Until I'm dead, it will have an effect on me from jobs . . . to family life to sex. Everything."

One priest in the Albany diocese, the Rev. David Bentley, admitted abusing Oathout. Bentley has since been removed from the ministry. But Oathout said there were others in the diocese who abused him as well.

### Subtle reminders

Oathout, a stocky man with blue eyes, often breaks down in tears when speaking about his childhood and the years of abuse. He has hallucinations. Nightmares.

He said he cries every day. "Nothing is normal in my life," he said.

The smell of a certain cigarette or the simple act of washing his hair brings up excruciating memories for him. Oathout said that Bentley often shampooed the young Curtis' hair and fondled him while the boy showered.

Oathout said he never wanted to have his name in the newspapers - he said he's married and has children.

He still won't disclose where he lives or his job status. He felt compelled to tell his story and push for new legislation after state Supreme Court Justice Joseph Teresi issued a "gag order" Feb. 10. It restricts attorneys in several lawsuits that were filed against the diocese from publicly speaking about those lawsuits.

Teresi has since recused himself from overseeing the lawsuits and a new judge has been assigned.

Oathout's attorney, John Aretakis, has moved to have the gag order lifted.

### Speaking out

Without Aretakis able to speak publicly for him, Oathout began to speak out himself about the abuse by Bentley and other priests. He has met with other victims and legislators and been interviewed by national media outlets.

"Curtis has been forced to be very, very brave," said Aretakis, who would not comment further.

After he reported the abuse to the diocese, Oathout accepted a settlement in 1994 for \$150,000, which included a confidentiality agreement. He received an additional \$75,000 in June 2002 to buy a mobile home, and \$150,000 in August 2002.

The diocese has said the money was to help him with counseling and continuing education. Oathout said it was intended to keep him silent.

Oathout said he wants the Albany diocese and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard to provide him names of any other priests, or individuals associated with the diocese, who, he said, abused him. So far they haven't provided him any information.

### Taped meetings

In addition to revealing his identity and intimate details of his life, Oathout has also come forward with tapes he recorded of a series of meetings he had with Bishop Hubbard and Bentley, the priest who admitted to Hubbard he abused Oathout. Bentley also admits the abuse on the tapes.

Bentley, a former principal at Vicentian Institute High School, had been working as a priest in New Mexico when Hubbard recalled him and removed him from active ministry in 2002.

Bentley now lives in western New York and could not be reached for comment on this article.

Diocese officials said because they have not heard the tapes they cannot verify the validity of the tapes or comment on them.

"We have no way of knowing if they are accurate or complete. We don't know the sequence or content of the tapes," said diocese spokesman Ken Goldfarb.

Diocesan attorney Michael Costello has filed a motion in state Supreme Court that would require Oathout to provide the diocese copies of the tapes. The motion is still pending.

### Difficult childhood

Oathout grew up in Watervliet in a broken home with five brothers and three sisters. His father, now deceased, was an alcoholic and could be physically violent toward his mother.

He and his brother Thomas were sent to an orphanage - the Albany Home for Children (now Parsons Child and Family Center) when they were young boys. Curtis was 4; Thomas was 6.

For the next 12 years, Curtis Oathout lived in 23 different foster homes and orphanages, including La Salle Home for Boys, and Vanderhyden in Troy.

Bentley would often bring him away on weekends and Oathout said he felt some happiness to get away from the foster homes.

When Oathout was 9, he said, Bentley started to abuse him at Albany Home for Children. The abuse continued repeatedly over the years.

Oathout said it was only after he threatened to physically harm Bentley did the abuse stop. Oathout was 16 at the time.

Years passed, and Oathout kept the story inside. In 1993, he finally told his story to Albany diocese officials. The next year, he got the first of the three payments.

Oathout said that same year he provided the diocese with detailed information about other priests who abused. He could not remember names but gave details about faces and places.

#### Brothers' suits

Curtis' brother Thomas reached a confidential settlement for \$70,000 from the diocese in 1997, to be used for counseling. The diocese said he actually used the money for other things and went public with his story of abuse after the diocese refused to give him more money.

A third brother, Edward Oathout, now serving a 5-to-15-year sentence in Attica for molesting two girls, received a confidential settlement for undisclosed amount in 1997. Edward later sued Bentley, charging him with abuse. Judge Teresi threw out the suit, filed in June 2002, saying it "contained no date and no specifics in regard to injuries incurred or alleged to have been incurred."

#### National issue

After the nationwide abuse problem in the Roman Catholic Diocese came to light in January 2002, Curtis Oathout returned again to the Albany diocese and Bishop Hubbard seeking information and the names of the men who abused him.

Diocese spokesman Goldfarb said every allegation the diocese receives about priests is investigated. "If we can determine the identity of a priest and if there is something that demands attention, we take action," he said, speaking in general about diocese policies although he declined comment on the Oathout case.

Oathout met numerous times with diocese officials, including Hubbard and Sister Anne Bryan Smollin, a counselor for the diocese, and eventually received the additional \$225,000 in 2002 as part of a settlement.

He taped meetings with Hubbard, explaining it was a way to have the diocese officials verify the abuse occurred.

The tapes reveal Oathout as a man tormented and filled with anguish, rage and a heartbreaking sense of betrayal by the priests he trusted a child and teenager.

At times on the tapes, Oathout pleads with Bentley for answers about why Bentley abused him as a child.

He asks Bentley if he believes he should be in jail for the abuse.

For his part, Hubbard tries to placate Oathout and calm him. Hubbard says a couple of times on the tapes he cannot recollect certain things that Oathout said he told him in the past.

Oathout said he informed Bishop Hubbard in 1993 or 1994 there were other priests who abused him, yet, he said, Hubbard did nothing.

In April 2002, Oathout asked Hubbard why nothing was done even after he reported the abuse.

#### Taped questions

As recorded on the tapes:

HUBBARD: I'm not denying that you did [tell me]. I'm saying I can't remember. I would have done the same thing in 1993.

OATHOUT: You told me if you can't remember names it would be hard to find out, a person like me doesn't forget that. That burns in my soul.

HUBBARD: I'm not denying you said it, I don't have a recollection of it.

Oathout said he desperately wants the names of other individuals who abused him as a sign the diocese acknowledges his pain.

In another recorded conversation, Oathout questions when the bishop knew that Bentley abused him - Hubbard said it was 1986:

HUBBARD: I knew he abused children, but I didn't exactly, I didn't know who they were.

(A long pause) He told me there were other victims, yes.

OATHOUT: He didn't give names.

HUBBARD: Not to me.

OATHOUT: Not to you. To any church official?

Written apology

Bishop Hubbard wrote Oathout a July 1, 2002, letter which said: "I am pleased we have been able to have several conversations the past few months regarding the great harm you and you family sustained as the result of sexual misconduct by representatives of the church.

"I sincerely apologize for the great harm and pain you experienced at the hands of Father Bentley and any other representatives of the Church. I also apologize for the hurt you experienced when you met with [diocese attorney Michael] Costello and myself at the time you brought forth your allegations in the early 1990s."

For his part, Hubbard - who has declined interview requests from The Sunday Gazette for this article - told The Evangelist, the newspaper for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany that: "I have to acknowledge that part of the crisis was created by actions I took, even though I followed the advice and guidance of experts in the field about how to deal with this. I'm not saying I'm the victim. I contributed to the problem."

1986 reported

The diocese first learned about sexual misconduct by Bentley in 1986. He was sent to a treatment facility and after that an independent Board of Psychologists determined he was fit for ministry. Bentley then served in Africa, Ohio, New Mexico and in Albany.

In the 1990s the diocese learned of another incident of sexual misconduct by Bentley which had occurred in the 1970s.

Last year Hubbard reviewed Bentley's file, and removed him from ministry.

Conversation with abuser

The following conversation took place in a May 10, 2002, meeting between Oathout and Bentley.

OATHOUT: The stigma, the guilt the shame and disgrace run deep in me. In me! I want to run. I want to hide and just simply fade away. . . .

Did you know each and every time you touched me, you did the things you did to me that it was a crime? Did you?

BENTLEY. I knew that it was wrong, yes.

OATHOUT: Did you know it was a crime? That was my question.

BENTLEY: Yes.

OATHOUT: You knew it was a crime. You belong in jail.

BENTLEY: Today?

OATHOUT. Whenever.

BENTLEY: Perhaps, yes.

Bentley also admits on the tape that he abused Oathout repeatedly, and says that Hubbard knew about the abuse "probably 15 or 16 years ago."

No magic wand

Hubbard was asked in The Evangelist if the diocese is nearing the end of the scandal or if more things will be revealed.

"I don't think we're near the end in the sense that the fallout will continue to occur over a long period of time. We have pierced the boil and begun to take steps toward healing. But I don't think there's any magic-wand solution. Also, there's always the potential that other victims we don't know about will come forward and other perpetrators will be named."

What remains to be seen is how the scandal in the Catholic church and within the Albany diocese has impacted the faith of many staunch Catholics.

Oathout said he believes in God. "Yet," he said, "I find it hard to believe a god will allow this. Why did he take innocent boys and make them sacrificial lambs for these priests?"

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