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## Confrontation with Priest on Tape

Albany in Recording of Session Attended by Bishop, Answers Sought and Guilt Admitted

By Andrew Tilghman  
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One morning last spring, behind closed doors at the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese headquarters, a 40-year-old man confronted the priest who had abused him repeatedly three decades before. As Bishop Howard Hubbard looked on, the man, now a married father of two, demanded an apology.

"Nobody's protecting you now. Beg for my forgiveness," he screamed. "Down on your knees, down on your knees and beg. Beg!"

The Rev. David Bentley, now 60, spoke quietly. "I'll get down on my knees -- don't touch me," he stammered.

"I am asking you again, OK, you know, for you to forgive me," the priest said, according to a recording of the meeting obtained by the Times Union.

The tape offers a rare window into the intensive therapy that the diocese has provided to victims of sexual abuse who came forward during the past year. The meeting also illuminates the church's counseling method, which is now at the center of a lawsuit the victim filed in December in which the man claims Hubbard and others used his therapy as a way to manipulate him and to prevent him from hiring an attorney.

In the meeting at the diocesan Pastoral Center, Hubbard and church therapist Sister Anne Bryan Smollin sat silently as Bentley said he molested seven children, and the victim -- who asked that only his first name, Curtis, be used in this story -- went on at length about his suicidal thoughts, sexual dysfunction and vivid memories of the abuse he suffered in church rectories, including at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Albany.

"You don't know what you did to me. It crushed me, and it still crushes me," Curtis told Bentley. "You know I can't have sex. You know that. You know what that does to me?"

"I can't (expletive) live with myself. I want to die. I want to die all the time. I want to kill; I want to kill people all the time. I want to kill," he said. "How am I supposed to deal with people on an everyday basis with what I go through?"

Curtis' interrogation of his abusers was threaded with theological questions that underscore the religious faith intertwined in his relationship with the priest.

"Do you think God forgives you for this? Do you really?" the victim asked.

"Do I think God forgives me?" Bentley said quietly.

"Yeah."

"Yes, I think, there is, as the Bible says, no sin that God cannot forgive," the priest said.

However, he later said: "OK, this was kind of an unforgivable sin because I violated, OK, your trust. I

violated your trust."

At times Curtis read from notes he had prepared for the encounter with Bentley.

"Blasphemy is an act of disrespect or impiety toward something regarded as sacred. Is boyhood sacred? Is manhood sacred before God? Is it?" he asked Bentley. "Are the filthy acts you performed on me and the horrors and the shame they left me with blasphemous before God? Hmm?"

"They are," Bentley replied, almost inaudibly.

Bentley, who was removed from ministry last year due to credible allegations of sexual abuse, served as a principal at Albany's Vincentian Institute and later worked as a chaplain at Albany Medical Center before leaving the Albany Diocese. His last assignment was at a small parish in Demming, N.M.

Bentley met Curtis at the Albany Home for Children and the priest sexually abused him between 1972 and 1979. Last summer, Hubbard quietly paid Curtis more than \$225,000.

Bentley befriended Curtis, who was from a broken home, at age 10. During the next six years, Bentley would often take the boy on overnight stays at rectories, where they would eat dinner with other clergy and watch television before going to bed, Curtis said.

In the recorded session, Bentley admitted that Curtis was the first boy he molested and talked about the "agony" and remorse he felt.

"I think, most of the time, when those actions happened, I apologized to you. I said I'm sorry, OK, you know, in the morning. Many times I said I'm sorry," Bentley said haltingly.

"You may see that this was something that I just -- boom -- did and got myself satisfied. That wasn't it. I was in agony, my friend, you know, after I did that," said Bentley.

Curtis' emotional outbursts contrasted sharply with Bentley's restraint. The priest said he suffered from "arrested sexual development" and that he was 32 before he ever molested anyone.

"It was under control and then it was like a dam bursting, that is the only way I can explain it," Bentley said.

Curtis collapsed in tears upon learning he was the first victim, blaming himself for his own abuse. Hubbard, who said little through most of the meeting, spoke up to console him, saying, "It wasn't you."

Curtis pressed Bentley about who else knew about their relationship. Bentley said he always went to confession after his abuse, but a church law regarding the "confessional seal" prohibited other priests from reporting the abuse.

Priests who heard Bentley's confession were "just as guilty," Curtis said.

"They couldn't have said anything about what you did in the past, but they could have put somebody on notice. 'Look, I believe he may have a problem. Be careful with him. Make sure he's careful,' " Curtis said.

Bentley told Curtis he voluntarily began therapy for his sexual problems about 1978, when a counselor at the Pastoral Center sent him to a psychologist in Manhattan. He was told to recount his sexual abuse of children into a tape recorder and then listen to it. "The purpose of that was that, you know, in time, hopefully, OK, you know, I would develop, you know, an aversion," he said.

Curtis has said he accompanied Bentley on trips to New York where the priest molested him even as he was seeing a therapist.

Hubbard has repeatedly said he knew nothing about Bentley's problems with boys until 1986, when someone outside the church contacted him with a complaint of sexual abuse. Bentley was sent away for psychological treatment and returned to work as a chaplain at Albany Medical Center.

Hubbard has also refused to say how many victims have come forward with complaints of abuse and how many priests in active ministry remain under investigation. The Albany Diocese on Thursday declined to comment on the therapy sessions, citing the lawsuit pending in state Supreme Court in Albany and the reluctance to prejudice potential jurors.

Curtis said others in the room knew he was making a tape of the meeting using a microcassette recorder in his shirt pocket.

Curtis first reported his abuse to the diocese in 1994, when he agreed to accept a \$150,000 confidential settlement payment. He returned to the diocese in April, when he began intensive therapy. He also began meeting frequently with Hubbard, who took an active interest in his therapy.

Last year, at the height of the church's national sex-abuse scandal, he pressed Hubbard and others to help him identify other men he said abused him. In July, Hubbard acknowledged in a letter to Curtis that Bentley was not the only person from the church who molested him.

The church gave Curtis a check for \$75,000 in May and in August gave him an untraceable bank check for \$150,000 drawn on a Catholic Charities account, church officials have acknowledged.

In the May therapy session, Bentley sought to console Curtis, telling him, "You are still in very high esteem in my life."

"I can perhaps meet with you again, if you wish, and explain, OK, more things, OK, about myself. I'll be honest with you, I think you need closure, whenever it comes. And if it hasn't come from me, then it will probably come on my deathbed," Bentley said.