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Confronting His Abuser, on Tape

Voice of Anguish Demands Remorse of Priest and Bishop

By Daniel J. Wakin
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For more than a year, victims have spoken loud and clear in the sexual abuse scandal enveloping the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Their voices have been heard at news conferences, in interviews, at a meeting of the nation's bishops in Dallas last summer. The abusive priests, meanwhile, have remained largely silent.

But now, a victim has come forward with a series of tape recordings he made during meetings with his abuser—a priest in the Diocese of Albany—and the bishop of the diocese, Howard J. Hubbard. The tapes offer a rare glimpse into the private emotions of the victim, and the efforts of the bishop to deal with him.

In releasing the tapes, the victim, Curtis Oathout, decided to identify himself publicly for the first time. He had remained anonymous in court papers filed in a lawsuit against the diocese and in talking about his case earlier with reporters.

"I'm going to start wearing my history like a badge rather than a burden," Mr. Oathout said on Thursday. "Look, I'm a victim-survivor of this abuse, and I'm not going to hide it anymore, absolutely."

The tapes portray a troubled man alternately demanding justice, doggedly pursuing information about what the diocese knew about his abuser, berating the bishop and venting his anguish, as well as asking for financial help. They portray a predator priest stammering out apologies, grudgingly discussing his sexual disorder and trying to appease his angry victim. They reveal a bishop listening patiently and insisting he is doing all he can to help.

Mr. Oathout, now 39, said he was abused from the age of 9 until he was about 16 by the Rev. David L. Bentley, now 60. He first told the diocese about the abuse in 1993 and received a confidential \$150,000 settlement the following year. Last spring, as the scandal spread, Mr. Oathout returned to the diocese to urge officials there to track down other priests from the diocese who he said had abused him.

Starting in the spring, Mr. Oathout met with a church-affiliated social worker some 80 times, had a score of meetings with Bishop Hubbard and received more than \$225,000 in payments. The diocese said the money was given to help a deeply troubled man; Mr. Oathout said he had come to think that the money was part of an effort to keep him quiet.

Almost all the meetings he taped took place from last April to November, before he hired John Aretakis, a New York City lawyer representing dozens of people who are accusing Albany priests of abuse.

Mr. Oathout and Mr. Aretakis said they could not discuss the tapes now because on Feb. 10 the judge hearing Mr. Oathout's case, Justice Joseph C. Teresi of State Supreme Court in Albany, issued a broad warning against any public comment.

The diocese, asked to respond to the tapes, said in a statement that their accuracy, completeness, context and sequence had not been verified. It took note of Judge Teresi's warning, and said that

reporting on them could prejudice a jury in lawsuits. "Therefore we will await a fair evaluation of the facts in court rather than have the matter tried in the news media," said the statement from Ken Goldfarb, director of communications for the diocese.

When he first released some tapes in the weeks before the warning, Mr. Oathout said that diocesan officials were well aware that he had taped them. In one recording, he is heard telling them that he is doing so.

Mr. Oathout has also said he made the tapes partly because he was not good at taking notes, partly to have a record of officials acknowledging that the abuse took place and partly because he did not trust them. He has said he wanted to release the tapes in an effort to support his position that the diocese did not deal fairly with him.

Last April 11, in one of his first meetings with Bishop Hubbard, Mr. Oathout pressed the bishop about why no action had been taken against other priests who Mr. Oathout said had abused him. He said that he told the bishop about those priests in 1994, an assertion that the diocese has publicly denied.

BISHOP HUBBARD —I'm not denying that you did. I'm saying I can't remember. I would have done the same thing in '93.

MR. 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.

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

Mr. Oathout complained that after his report in 1993 about Father Bentley, he was not told that Father Bentley continued to serve as a priest.

MR. OATHOUT —You abandoned me. When I asked you for help, Bishop, spiritual help . . . I felt God abandoned me, Bishop. . . . Does he care?

BISHOP HUBBARD —But I do.

MR. OATHOUT —But you don't.

BISHOP HUBBARD —I do care. But obviously I have not manifested that care. But that doesn't mean I don't care. But what I'd like to do is manifest that care from this point forward.

On May 10, Mr. Oathout confronted Father Bentley at diocesan offices. He was seeking an apology, an acknowledgment of the priest's wrongdoing and details of other abuse he had committed.

MR. OATHOUT —Many days I just want to be dead, just dead, even around my family. For all these things I feel so angry. . . . You harmed me so bad, it hurts, to my core. I demand you talk to me.

FATHER BENTLEY —I will.

MR. OATHOUT —I demand that you help me out. Right now.

FATHER BENTLEY —Today is your day.

MR. OATHOUT —Today is my day. It's my life. I've spent my life in torment.

Later during that same meeting:

MR. OATHOUT —I want some things answered. It's my turn to take advantage of your vulnerability now. Do you know how much pain you've caused me in my life?

FATHER BENTLEY —I do.

MR. OATHOUT —List it. Go ahead, I'm listening.

FATHER BENTLEY —The pain that I caused you?

MR. OATHOUT —Uh-huh.

FATHER BENTLEY —Primarily, O.K., you had a very high regard for me until all of this started, and I, my inappropriate actions, blew you out of the water with that. That's the main thing.

Father Bentley said he met Mr. Oathout as a teenager. Mr. Oathout angrily disputed that, and the priest would only acknowledge that Mr. Oathout was 10 or 11.

MR. OATHOUT —You see what this does to me? Do you see it? Did you know or do you know what you did was wrong?

FATHER BENTLEY —Yes.

MR. OATHOUT —You did not.

FATHER BENTLEY —I think most of the time, Curt, when those actions happened, I apologized to you. I said I'm sorry, O.K., you know, in the morning. Many times I said I'm sorry.

The diocese has never said how many boys were abused by Father Bentley, although it paid settlements to two of Mr. Oathout's brothers. Mr. Oathout asks the priest how many boys he abused, and the priest tells him seven. Under Mr. Oathout's questioning, Father Bentley says he spoke of the abuse during confession in 1974 and was treated by a church therapist as early as 1978. The diocese has said it learned of Father Bentley's abuse in 1986.

Later in the meeting, Father Bentley tries to explain his actions.

FATHER BENTLEY —I'm willing to sit down and try to understand, to try to help Curt understand what I was going through. I was not aware of what I suffered from. My problem, O.K., Curt, you know, and you haven't asked this question, O.K., but you know, what I've learned in my therapy is that I suffer from very immature sexual development, and that goes back to when I was a kid. Nothing happened to me, but my sexual development was arrested in terms of probably when I was 7, 8 years old. One of the things that I have learned, O.K., you know, it was very easy for me to relate to young people.

MR. OATHOUT —A boy, a little boy. Who needed his innocence, who needed to be left alone. Who was vulnerable, who needed a friend, who only needed a friend.

At one point, Mr. Oathout called the abuse a pain that "clouded" his life, and before the tape ran out, he issued a warning.

MR. OATHOUT —Don't you ever hurt another kid in your life, don't you ever, you'd better not. You better not, you'll be seeing me . . . if I ever hear of you hurting another kid, and I mean that. . . . I mean that, Bentley, you just look in my eyes and see that.

FATHER BENTLEY —I know you're serious.

MR. OATHOUT —Oh, you better know I'm serious.

On June 4, Mr. Oathout received a \$75,000 check from the diocese to buy a mobile home. Two days later, he met with Bishop Hubbard.

MR. OATHOUT —I want you to know how honest I want you to be with me, Bishop, like a father

would be with a son. All right? Think of me as your real son. Would you let this happen to your blood? And after it did, how upset would you be? What would you do to people who molested me? What would you do to their bosses who covered it up for them and let me down?

For many victims, an excruciating issue is whether someone knew that their abusers were a threat. Mr. Oathout struggled to find out when the diocese knew of Father Bentley's abuse. Bishop Hubbard said it was not known until 1986.

MR. OATHOUT —Did you or did you not tell me you knew about me before that, but you did not contact victims to upset their life?

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

MR. OATHOUT —He didn't come clean. Bentley never came clean before I even came to you. He never came clean to the church.

BISHOP HUBBARD —He told me there were other victims, yes.

MR. OATHOUT —He didn't give names.

BISHOP HUBBARD —Not to me.

MR. OATHOUT —Not to you. To any church official?

BISHOP HUBBARD —Not that I know of. But, I would know this, that I said, one of the first times that I had the case shown to me, I had a list of names of everybody that was abused, and I started to approach every one of them. And I stopped after the second because certain people were not ready to do that to their lives.

Mr. Oathout said that the church therapist knew about Father Bentley's abuse.

BISHOP HUBBARD —Nobody, nobody in the diocese knew.

MR. OATHOUT —Nobody knew? Except for the diocese doctor that he went to, he admitted going to.

BISHOP HUBBARD —Well, he might've done that on his own.

MR. OATHOUT —No, he said it right here.

BISHOP HUBBARD —I would not be privy if he goes on his own to a psychiatrist or a psychologist. I'm not privy to that.

Mr. Oathout demanded that Father Bentley, who was removed from a New Mexico parish in April, never again serve as a priest.

MR. OATHOUT —You're going to go before God, Bishop. And you're going to answer for this guy. For keeping him. All of you guys are going to answer for that, Bishop. . . . Let me just say this, Bishop: Let my face be in every sleeping and waking moment of your existence.