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For Victims of Clergy Abuse, Pain Doesn't End

Those Speaking out for the First Time Describe Families Torn Apart

By Deborah Martinez
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Sharon Jones Witbeck waits for an apology that may never come.

And even if it did — even if the Rev. Joseph Mancuso finally admitted he was sorry for what she says were two years of fondling and groping in his gold sedan — it would not make up for the 30 years her mother unwittingly chastised her for leaving the Roman Catholic Church. Or the little faith she now has in God.

"Mancuso destroyed two of the most important things in my life — my faith and my mother's respect for me," said Witbeck, a 48-year-old divorced mother of three from Rensselaer County. Her mother is now deceased. "I was a devout Catholic who belongs to no church today, never baptized her children in any church and had to spend a lifetime living with my mother's anger and disappointment because of it. I never had the courage to tell her about the abuse. She loved the church so much and I didn't want to take that away."

Over the past several weeks, as the Albany Diocese has released the names of six priests it acknowledges as having had past cases of sexual misconduct with minors, and as many parishioners have expressed dismay and heartfelt wishes for their pastors to come back, local victims have finally found the courage to speak publicly.

They are upset that, in their view, the church has made parishioners and priests the scandal's focus. They hope their stories shed light on how "one case long ago," which many parishioners are eager to forgive, can mean a lifetime of repercussions for families and children who must grow into adults plagued with their trauma. For a decade, a former Albany County couple says, their son has shut them out. More than 25 years ago, they say, he was abused by the Rev. John Patrick Bertolucci. No amount of prayer and penance Bertolucci could ever do in a monastery would make up for the past decade, they say.

Their son, the couple says, blamed his parents for bringing Bertolucci into their lives with invitations to family dinners and nudges to attend youth group events led by the popular priest. Until last year, the couple wasn't even allowed to meet their son's two children.

"John Bertolucci didn't just hurt our son. He ripped apart our family," says the man's mother.

Because of the fledgling relationship she and her husband have begun to share with their son this year, she asked not to be identified, for fear that he might close the door again. "He was a man entrusted with so much and he took advantage. We haven't been able to go on with our lives like he already did for so many years," she said.

The Rev. Kenneth Doyle, spokesman for the Albany Diocese, declined to discuss the specifics of the two cases. But he confirmed it was Witbeck's allegations earlier this year that prompted Bishop Howard Hubbard to investigate Mancuso, the 60-year-old pastor at Mount Carmel Church in Schenectady. During the investigation, Doyle said, Mancuso admitted to "some misconduct, and he was removed based on those comments."

Doyle also acknowledged the bishop met last week with the couple who says their son was abused by Bertolucci. He declined to elaborate. The couple said their son first made the allegations against Bertolucci 10 years ago, and the family received counseling arranged by the diocese during that time.

It is not clear if the couple's son is among those victims who received \$2.3 million paid out by the diocese in confidential settlements over the past 25 years. The parents said they didn't know and the

son could not be reached for comment. Witbeck said she has received no money from the diocese.

Mancuso and Bertolucci are currently with family and friends, the diocese says, deciding whether to live an entirely secular life or to move into a monastery setting for "a life of prayer and penance." If they choose life in a monastery, they will be prohibited from any contact with parishioners, celebrating Mass publicly, wearing clerical garb or presenting themselves publicly as a priest.

A zero-tolerance policy passed by the nation's nearly 300 bishops during the annual U.S. Bishops Conference in Dallas last month set up the criteria to remove the two men from ministry and provided an opportunity for victims to come forward. Joseph Mancuso was a seminarian and assistant to the pastor at Holy Spirit Church in East Greenbush during the late 1960s. But Sharon Jones Witbeck says that to her and all the families in the parish, he was viewed as a full-fledged priest.

For about two years, beginning when Witbeck was 14, Mancuso would pick her up at home for church youth group events or trips to the movies, she said, and when they were inside the car, he would fondle her as she "sat like a statue." Her mother, struggling alone to raise five children, trusted that her daughter was safe.

"I'm still asking the girl in me why I let this man touch me for so long," says Witbeck. "I was not a willing participant, but I did not pull away from him either. I guess all I can say is that he was like God in my eyes. I loved him and held him in the highest respect. He was like the father I never had. My very existence revolved around the church and I did what I thought it wanted and expected from me."

Witbeck said until her abuse she had been seriously considering a life as a nun. In casual memoirs she has begun to keep since seeking counseling through the diocese this year, she laments the emotional scars left from the abuse.

"My abuser betrayed me, used me and took away everything that I believed in," she writes. "I have waited a lifetime for him to acknowledge that what he did to me was inexcusable, wrong and not my fault. After Dallas, I patiently waited for the announcement of (Mancuso's) name. I was still hoping there would be an apology. It never came from him. Now, it won't matter because it would be forced."

Mancuso was ordained as a priest toward the end of his abuse with Witbeck. As the fondling escalated, she said, she finally shunned the sexual advances and refused to be alone with him.

"What kind of guy would be studying to be a priest and then do this to a young girl?" she says. "He had no morals, yet he wanted to lead the church and probably hurt others we don't even know about in the process."

Witbeck says so many times over the years she wrote "Mancuso" on her daily to-do lists, a painful reminder to come forward with her allegations. But she never followed through, fearful that no one would believe her.

If not for the torrent of publicity the scandal has generated over the past six months, she believes many victims would continue to hide their shame.

"I think everything would be different for all of us if the church and priests and bishops had been more open and forthcoming," she says. "We're barely beginning to really grasp the effects these men had. It is unbelievable people trusted so much by so many were returned to the church without full disclosure. A case-by-case review might have worked if the bishops had not let it get to this point and created new victims in all the parishioners they kept secrets from." Two weeks ago, when Hubbard released the list of six priests he had removed based on allegations of sexual misconduct, a reporter called the mother of John Bertolucci's alleged victim to give her the news. She was on the golf course and took the call on her cellphone.

"Oh my, they named him! The bishop named him!" she cried. "I can't believe it. His name is finally out there."

As a 12-year-old in the 1970s, they say, their son was molested by Bertolucci, who is now 64 and retired at a friary in Catskill.

It wasn't until the youth had grown to be a man in his 20s that he revealed the abuse to his parents

and three siblings. Suddenly, a family that had been built on the Catholic Church and fashioned after the teachings of a magnetic priest they had grown to love started to crumble.

Their son stopped taking their phone calls and asked them not to visit. He told his family that he needed space to cope with what he felt was his parents' fault in the ordeal.

"We really did think the world of John Bertolucci. He could do no wrong because he was a man of the cloth," the victim's father says. "I don't know, I guess we were responsible in some way. We thought of priests as someone who stood above us and we could put all our trust in, and we taught our children to think the same."

The couple says they first became close to Bertolucci in the late 1970s, after a referral to local prayer group meetings for the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement he helped lead nationwide. The family showed up at these functions. Young people often circled Bertolucci after meetings and during informal group gatherings on the weekend.

Bertolucci's power as an evangelist led him to later produce a syndicated television program during the 1980s, prompting some to refer to him as "the Catholic Pat Robertson." At one point, he served as a teacher at St. John's school in Rensselaer and Maria College in Albany, as well as vice chancellor of the diocese.

All along, the couple thought of him as an "extraordinary spirit" they were fortunate to count as a family friend. He came to their home for occasional dinners.

"His charisma is unbelievable," says the victim's father today. "If he told you it was pitch black outside, even if it was sunny, you'd believe him."

At their private meeting with Hubbard last week, for the first time in a decade they felt a crack in their resolve to never forgive the bishop they had once revered, the couple says. Until then, they had been convinced the bishop had ordered their subtle ouster from their Albany County parish when the allegations had first surfaced, and they had believed the counseling sessions with a priest in Hubbard's office had suggested their son was somehow to blame for luring Bertolucci.

After years of bouncing from one Christian church to another, they are now Episcopalians.

This weekend, the couple — now retired and living out of state — visited their son's upstate New York home for the first time in years. While they are hopeful the family will make peace, they know their ordeal will always haunt them.

"They say, 'It's a long time, why not forgive them?' " the victim's father says, referring to the defenders of the priests whose sexual misconduct has been admitted by the diocese. "John Bertolucci hurt so many people, even the bishop. I could never forgive him for that. He took away our family. It's a pain we can never really get rid of, and time with our son and grandchildren we can never get back. That means more than any clean record he may have kept in those years since."

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