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An Abuse Victim Steps out of the Shadows

By Steve Israel
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Centerville, NY - The thin 7-year-old wanted to be an altar boy. He could wear that cool black-and-white robe and help God's representative on Earth, Father George.

So one Sunday morning about 30 years ago, the boy's parents drove him past farm fields to Holy Cross Church in South Centerville, just outside Middletown. In a small room with wood-paneled walls, Father George Boxelaar helped the boy slip on his robe. Then the priest leaned over and began kissing the boy on his lips, he claims today.

The boy did not like the way that felt.

At home, he told his father about the kissing and his uncomfortable feelings. He couldn't explain that this wasn't just a peck on the cheek, but making out. After all, at 7, how much did he know about kissing? His dad reassured his son. Father George was from Holland.

"It must be an old Dutch custom," the boy's father said.

Father George kept kissing the boy. In a few years, the priest began rubbing the boy's crotch. The boy felt so repulsed, his stomach churned. He kept quiet.

"I was taught to do what adults told me to do," says the victim today. "Especially a priest."

Like hundreds of victims of sexual abuse by priests, the boy kept the revolting mix of guilt, shame and anger inside as he grew into a man. No one would believe him, he thought. And besides, people might think he - not the priest - was to blame.

But decades after the abuse first started, he still felt imprisoned by it - and the silence that surrounded it.

Like so many other victims who did not get action or sympathy from the church and family members, he called the newspaper.

"I used to feel guilt," says the man who does not want his name used because he's a parent. "Now I just want to get it out in the open so there's acknowledgment this happened, so it's less apt to happen again."

The man, who will be called Frank, is one of several local men who have stepped forward with allegations of sexual abuse by priests. The Orange County District Attorney's Office has received complaints about Boxelaar from two men and two parents.

Allegations against three other priests have also been made. In each case, the abuse allegedly occurred at least 30 years ago. Apparently, only two of the priests, including the Rev. Francis Stinner and an unnamed priest, are still alive. None of the victims or their families have asked for money. They know the statute of limitations for prosecution has long passed.

Like Frank, they just want to escape the prison of guilt, anger or what clinical social worker James

Potter of the Counseling and Evaluation Service of Middletown calls "the very strong shame-evoking feelings" they have struggled with for so many years.

"Most are good-standing Catholics," says Dan Scribner, the chief investigator for the Orange County District Attorney's Office. "These are not people who are gold diggers. They're not looking for anything. They just want to make sure it's out there."

Frank has tried to get it out there.

One Sunday about 10 years ago, he read about the Rev. Edward Pipala, who abused more than 50 boys at churches in Monroe and Goshen. He walked from the living room into the kitchen where his parents sat.

"Do you remember what I told you about Father George," he asked.

His mother lowered her eyes.

"We heard rumors," she said. "Did he touch you?" Frank ached to turn those private rumors into public fact.

Because Boxelaar was a Carmelite priest, he called the Mount Carmel Priory in Middletown. He learned that Boxelaar, who also served at Our Lady of the Scapular in Unionville, had died in Holland three years earlier.

Frank also learned that several parents had come forward with complaints about Father George - a claim backed by the Rev. Michael Driscoll, Carmelite provincial. The parents wanted their complaints kept quiet. The order didn't want to be embarrassed, says Driscoll, who was not at Mount Carmel while Boxelaar was there.

Frank was told that the priest had been quietly sent back to Holland, that Father George had abused boys because he couldn't express his feelings.

A few months ago, Frank anonymously put fliers about the sexual abuse by Father George on cars parked outside Holy Cross. The pastor, the Rev. Robert Porpora, asked if anyone had information about Father George to see him. Porpora says one family came forward.

Last month, as news of sexual abuse by priests rocked the church, Frank again called the priory. He got many of the same answers. He also called the district attorney's office.

He also called Holy Cross to request a public meeting about Boxelaar. Porpora says he told him he didn't think that was a good idea, that Frank should call the Archdiocese of New York. Frank called the archdiocese and was told to write a letter.

He fumed at "the total hypocrisy" of the church.

"The institution is more important than the victim," he thought.

Frank had enough. He called the press.

"I want it out on a newspaper level," he says, "so there's community acknowledgment."

The fact that many victims wait so long to report the abuse is an indication of just how deep the pain cuts.

They fume at the priest who abused them. They fume at the church that protected him. They're perplexed by the parents who don't believe them. They bury their feelings of abuse beneath layers of anger, mistrust and shame.

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