



Commentary

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Author P. A. Kane says he and his brothers were molested by their South Buffalo parish priest, Ron Silverio, in the early 1970s.

Fear and Loathing a Catholic Priest



by P. A. Kane / Jul. 17, 2018 3pm EST

The breach

I can't remember if my younger brother and I found it strange or if we resisted his request that we sleep in separate beds, in separate rooms. What I do remember, what is burned in my psychic apparatus for all eternity, is him coming into the darkened room where I was pretending to be asleep, sidling up next to me on the sofa bed, and breathing on me. Hot, excited breath that filled me with a paralyzing terror as he pulled down my sweatpants and scrutinized my 12-year-old body by the thin light of a flashlight before gently touching and stroking my genitals.

PRINT EDITION



Week of 8/1/18 - 8/7/18



MOST RECENT STORIES

- 1. Photos: Cobblestone Live 2018
- 2. Centerfold: Michele Melcher at Revolution Gallery
- 3. Looking Backward: Scajaquada Expressway, circa 1960
- 4. This Week's Public Picks: Venus Vacation + just ending now
- 5. Eighth Grade

In that bed, in those interminable minutes under the heat of his wheezing breath and that little flashlight, so alone and afraid, part of me died. Murdered by a priest who had infiltrated our family and played out his repressed sexual desires on innocent boys who thought he was their friend, who thought he treated them well because they were special, who thought he visited their house because his family was special. It was all a ruse.

The setup

We were playing in the street—a game called running bases that simulated a baseball rundown—and hardly noticed him as he walked by and up to the steps to our front door. After a moment he was let in, and my brother and I looked quizzically at each other. We called time on running bases to find out who had just entered our house.

Inside, our dad was in his spot at the end of the couch. Sitting in the chair opposite him, dressed in shirt sleeves and slacks and being served a drink by my mom, was Father Silverio, the new, young parish priest who had baptized my baby sister several weeks earlier at Holy Family Church in South Buffalo.

My dad was beaming at this unexpected visit. I knew not to interrupt their conversation but listened attentively, picking off demographic information: where he was from, what other parishes he had ministered to, how long he had been a priest.

We waited and listened, fidgeting and probably getting yelled at here and there. As he was leaving my brother and I stopped him on the porch and asked our burning question: What was he doing here? He looked us in the eye and said, “Visiting,” a totally unacceptable answer. He was the guy on the altar in those brightly colored robes commanding mass and speaking of life and death, heaven and hell. Why would he visit us? And where was the black uniform with the collar?

As we walked with him to his car he explained that he was new to the area and was making friends with some of the families in the parish. He assured us this was completely normal and that he was only required to wear the collar to conduct official church business. I was skeptical. Though I was young, unsophisticated, and unaware of the effort to put a more human face on the church as a result of Vatican II, our whole world was comprised of Catholics, and I had never seen or heard of such a thing—of being friends with a priest. That would be like being friends with the mayor. It didn’t happen to people who moved in our circles.

My instincts would be proved right.

We must have cut quite an intriguing picture to Silverio that spring Sunday morning in 1972 when our whole family stayed after mass to see our baby sister baptized—tired, emotionally detached parents and 10 mostly obedient kids, six of whom were handsome blond boys ranging in age from three to 14. We presented a perfect amalgamation of size, devoutness, social ambition, and parental exhaustion for a predator to manipulate.

And manipulate he did, showing up at our house regularly for dinner and having long conversations with our dad about the liturgy and history of the

UPCOMING EVENTS

1. Wed Aug. 1, 5:00pm: Live at Larkin: South Buffalo Night
2. Wed Aug. 1, 5:00pm: National Comedy Center Grand Opening
3. Wed Aug. 1, 7:00pm: Tank and The Bangas
4. Thu Aug. 2, 5:00pm: Dark Star Orchestra
5. Thu Aug. 2, 8:00pm: Prince vs David Bowie Dance Party



church. My father valued these conversations greatly, and Silverio's visits to our house gave our family instant status in the parish. My older siblings were stars as part of the band at the folk mass on Sundays, in the church plays, at CYO. Though mostly in the background, I too felt the buzz of this church celebrity. All of this was not lost on Silverio.

Also not lost on Silverio was how hungry we were. We weren't hungry in the sense that we didn't have enough to eat, because we always did. We were hungry in the sense that in a family of our size food was regulated, so everybody got their fair share. To save money we used powdered milk, which was mixed with water and then mixed again with regular milk. (Corn Flakes never tasted so good.) If our dad caught you drinking the milk straight out of the carton before it was mixed with the lumpy powder, there was hell to pay. We envied people rich enough to drink straight milk; if you had Pepsi or Coke, you were the Rockefellers. I remember being at a cousin's first communion party and starting a third glass of soda and my dad yelling from across the room to put it down, embarrassing the shit out of me.

Silverio soon started to take my brothers and me, while totally ignoring our sisters, for ice cream. He let us get whatever we wanted—sprinkles, chocolate syrup, cherries, the works.

Eventually, he started to invite us to the church rectory. The first time was a January afternoon in 1973, when a bunch of us, including my teenage brothers, were invited by Silverio to watch a hockey game on TV, the Sabres versus the Bruins. It was a game we were all dying to see, since a month earlier the upstart Sabres took it to the mighty Bruins 7-3, with Jim Schoenfeld beating the shit out of Wayne Cashman after crashing through the boards where the Zamboni entered the rink. In the rematch, Phil Esposito killed the Sabres from the slot while I nearly got sick on the endless pizza and sodas Silverio provided.

When the game was all but decided by Esposito's hat-trick, Silverio started to wrestle playfully with the older boys. Though he was young and vibrant in his late 20s, the wrestling struck me as odd. Messing around, you maybe punched someone in the arm once in a while, but absent a serious conflict you tried to express your dominance by talking shit or beating somebody on the field of play, not fake wrestling.

There were other odd things, too. Sitting in the front seat on the way to get ice cream he began to touch me (and others, I suppose) in the groin area. When I called him on it, he said it was just tickling, no big deal, almost as if this were the way everyone tickled and I were ignorant in some way. The day of the hockey game I saw nothing untoward in the wrestling but looking back I now understand this was probably the setup for when he got me alone in the coming days—a methodical, well planned setup.

After the hockey game, Silverio extended a standing invitation to drop by the rectory any time I wanted, which I of course thought was bullshit—just something he said but didn't mean. Sure enough, though, on a Saturday afternoon after some basketball in Mulroy Park, which was right behind the church and rectory, I rang the doorbell and was let in and directed up to his quarters by the church secretary.

Silverio never said a word when I went for a third soda or a second bag of chips that were in a box on top of the mini-fridge in his personal bathroom. He was always really nice to me, never yelling or correcting me like my dad, coaches, and every other adult with whom I had contact. There was also the fact that my association with him elevated me and my family in the community. So when the wrestling started and he went for my balls—given the food, celebrity, the lack of yelling, and my youthful naiveté—I was hardly in a position to understand how I was being manipulated and certainly in no position to defend myself. As with the tickling in the car, my objections were smoothly deflected, as if somehow I was the one who was out of step.

Soon enough, though, things changed. Alone in his quarters, the lighthearted tickling and wrestling became aggressive. His breath would become hot and heavy as he pressed his thick erect dick against me while pawing at my penis. During the wrestling he encouraged me to touch his penis, too, and I did maybe once or twice, but it felt wrong and unnatural. As horrible as all of this was, the most disturbing thing was the hot, heavy breathing and gasping. Deep and pugnacious, it was like no other sound I have ever heard before or since, and I can recall it as if it were yesterday, as if it were five minutes ago.

Upping the game

I remember fighting back the tears when Silverio said goodbye to the parish at his last mass. I don't know why he was transferred, but associate priests were constantly shuffled in and out of the parish all the time. Curiously, though, as I was on the way home from that last mass, walking behind a group of older boys from our street, one of them turned to me, laughing, and said, "Guess Father Silverio won't be grabbing your balls anymore." I didn't know what to make of this comment, but it turned out not to be true. He would go to Mount Carmel parish in Niagara Falls, a 30-minute car ride to the north, and would be free to take my brother and I on overnight visits.

It still made me feel special when Silverio came for us. At his new rectory in Niagara Falls, after the tickling and wrestling had momentarily run its course, there wasn't anything to do there. We would maybe watch TV, play some board games, and at least one time I remember bringing my ice skates and going to open skate at the rink that was a short walk away. Of course, food was huge, and we would have fabulous dinners prepared by the rectory cook.

Showering was also a big thing. At home we had one bathroom, and if you took more than a two-minute shower someone else would be shafted on the hot water and you never heard the end of it. At the rectory there must have been a 500-gallon hot-water tank because you could shower till your skin was peeling away. The price you paid was Silverio would come in the bathroom under some false pretense and casually pull back the shower curtain and ask if you had enough soap or some other bullshit. He would leer at your naked body for several long moments in a way that was wanton and lustful, discomfoting and humiliating.

It seems curious now that my brother and I never discussed, at least with each other, what was being done to us. Later on my brother reminded me of the way it was back then, when our parents and every other adult we had contact with directed us around in tight little boxes and didn't really talk to us so much as

they talked at us. The only time you were ever asked to express yourself was when you screwed something up. And, like the limits placed on our food, there were limits on the attention you received. So, if you didn't have a gaping wound with blood pouring from your body, and you didn't get bad grades or accidentally break a neighbor's window, as far as my parents were concerned everything was fine, everything was perfect—an apple cart that is not upset is a good apple cart.

Also, though today it might seem odd, we were never schooled about the impropriety of someone touching our bodies and didn't understand it was wrong. Even if we had understood it, our ability to communicate was undeveloped. We could never hope to broach such a confusing and complicated subject.

In the end Silverio's rapacious sexual appetite got the best of him. He had been much more aggressive with my older teenage brothers, and not long after the nightmare I lived out on the sofa bed in the rectory, one of them went to our dad explained what was going on and it all stopped. And, it stopped, thankfully, before any oral acts or penetration occurred.

After effects

Going back over all of this and putting dates together, I now realize that, though subtle, the effects of the abuse appeared almost immediately. In fifth grade, as part of Mrs. Hayhurst's experimental reading class, I was able to choose books from a small classroom library and read them independently in a corner of the room that had some carpeting and comfortable chairs rather than doing the traditional reading group thing. You were evaluated by way of short interviews and essays you wrote about the books you read. Radical stuff in 1973, and I not only loved it but was one of the top readers in the class. Then, all of the sudden in the last quarter of the year, which was when I started to visit Silverio at the rectory, I inexplicably stopped reading and became a malingerer. After knocking out about 10 books in each of the previous quarters, I barely got through two short ones on Marco Polo and Greek mythology. Both Mrs. Hayhurst and I were confused and exasperated that my reading had come to a virtual standstill. I had been exceeding expectations throughout the year and all of the sudden I just...I don't know, became immobilized.

Sixth grade, which coincided with Silverio's transfer, was even worse. Not only was my intellectual curiosity gone, but I became a smart-ass and a bit of a punk and got caught shoplifting at JC Penney. My teacher called my parents several times during the year about my poor behavior and attitude, which was a first in my well-behaved, high-achieving family. Nothing—not being yelled at by my dad, not his silence—changed my poor behavior.

By seventh grade the abuse had stopped and I rallied a bit. Almost an upperclassman, I did all right in school without much effort. More importantly I started to get the attention of girls, which was really valuable to my sense of self and confidence. Though the soft shiny lips of girls were just about the best balm one could hope for, there was still something very wrong. Besides one semi-dramatic, semi-tragic relationship in ninth grade, I could never really get close to anyone in those years.

Innocence is the first casualty of abuse. Loss of innocence affects the choices we make and the boundaries we establish. Taken forever from the abused person is the choice to pursue relationships at a pace that is natural and comfortable. The ability to develop boundaries is also damaged since the power in an abusive relationship is in the hands of the abuser. Looking back now I can see how this played out not only in those first relationships but in all my relationships.

In high school I was a reasonably good athlete, decent looking and kind of smart, but mostly I was a cocky, bravado-filled asshole of zero substance. And whenever I went out with a girl, that was who she got. I had no ability to have a thoughtful, rational (or as thoughtful and rational as you could have at 16) conversation with a girl, where you proceeded at a mutually agreed-on pace with mutually agreed-on limits. I was all swagger and bluster, but just below the surface the self-doubt and feelings of worthlessness were intense. Because of other bad behaviors my dad had stopped talking to me or acknowledging my existence, my mom was always working and so tired, my siblings were all living out their own dysfunctional dramas, and I had nothing but this bravado-filled façade. The one deep relationship I had I couldn't hold because I didn't understand limits or boundaries. Other problems started to arise too: I sometimes drank till I blacked out, I couldn't concentrate or accomplish anything academically, and I got in my share of street fights.

When the chance for emotional intimacy occasionally presented itself, I was like a wheel with 50 broken spokes and had zero ability to be vulnerable or trust. How was I going to get close to anyone after Silverio had manipulated and abused me and my whole family? Maybe it would have been different if Silverio had owned up and had really been contrite instead of brushing me aside like I was nothing, like I was worthless, his only concern for himself. Who the fuck was I going to trust?

My older sister had this group of beautiful smart girlfriends who used to come to the house. Though all of them were very attractive, the thing that was most alluring was how mature and together they seemed to be. I would hear them talk about calculus and the yearbook staff and going to college, and I wished that one of them would take me by the hand and just talk to me, tell me how to be together, how to have substance. But, they of course, didn't tell me anything. Nobody ever told me anything.

All I had was records. And, that was no small thing. The Who and Todd Rundgren were everything to me. They were best friends, letting me know I was not alone. Even today, when one of their songs pops into the rotation, I feel a physical change behind my eyes and an emotional sense that all is well, that somewhere there is light and something to hope for in this shitty world.

Through my 20s there was a great deal of searching and more blackout drinking. Finally, as I was approaching 30, I met the person who would be my wife, and I got a good, stable, paying job. Though there are always challenges, we have stuck it out, never giving up on each other and believing in each other, for which I am so grateful.

Maybe an even bigger healing influence has been having my own kids. Being a father has given me purpose in life. When the shit is hitting the fan and breaking down all around my kids, nothing gives me greater joy than to see it

through with them, help them work everything out. Being present, giving my full attention to their needs, leaves me feeling like some grievous error in my past, some broken link in the cosmos, has been righted.

The fallout

As we know, pedophilia is a psychiatric disorder where an adult is sexually attracted to children, whereas gay and lesbian people are sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Yet, there is still a dumb and persistent effort by anti-gay activists to show a link—despite 40 years of research, duplicated dozens times—between homosexuality and abusive pedophilia. Researchers have found showing pictures of young boys to gay men did not arouse them any more than pictures of young girls aroused straight men, meaning gay men are no more attracted to children than straight men. I believe this research to be completely accurate.

A few years after everything came to a head with us, Silverio left the priesthood and, to the best of my knowledge, has lived his life as a gay man. Through the web of mutual friends from the parish, we learned bits of his history. I can't say how accurate any of these second-hand stories are, but from what we were told, Silverio actually knew he was gay at a young age. When he informed his family, they pushed him to enter the seminary, thinking the priesthood and the vow of celibacy would provide cover or a cure for what were considered base, perverted desires in those days. I can't say what was in Silverio's mind, but it is reasonable to speculate that the allure of the flesh was great, and, like a lot of sexually stifled priests, he acted on his desires in a perverse, hurtful manner.

As odd as it may seem, I have compassion for the sexually stifled Silverio in 1970s closeted America, some measure of understanding and even forgiveness. Other than the priesthood, where was that poor bastard going to go? When he figured out he was gay, probably in the late 1950s, still a boy of 12 or 13, he was shunned by his family and sent away. Who was he going to turn to? Who was going to support him? It had to be an awful existence, not just for him, but for all gay people hiding and repressing their sexuality, being scorned and rejected by larger society.

But to prey on young boys—how does one make that leap? How does a supposed man of God plunder innocent and naive boys to try to satisfy his own base desires? For that depravity, which robbed me of my church, trust, and belief, I have no compassion.

I've come to view Silverio as a predator rather than a pedophile, and I believe we, as a society, need to do a much better job trying to understand sexual deviance. We don't like to admit it, but there is a biological compulsion that produces a pedophile's attraction to children. As a society we have tended to think of deviant sexual behaviors as moral failings, lifestyle choices, or the price of a valueless society, and the easiest thing to do is to just lock these people up and throw away the key. But, I think it's a mistake to just jail pedophiles, no matter how great our desire for vengeance. Locking them away does next to nothing to address the problem of pedophilia. Dealing with the horrific violence done to children this way only serves to perpetuate the problem and create an endless stream of new victims. A smart, forward-leaning, compassionate society would try to understand the root causes and go about the business of mitigating and

eliminating its effects as much as possible. Short of that, we are just chasing our tails and needlessly hurting countless children and would-be pedophiles.

What I can't get past is the infuriating responses from both Silverio and the institution that enabled him to abuse us. When it was over, Silverio more or less absolved himself. He never really offered any kind of apology. We had a conversation, and my memory of the details are sketchy, but I remember feeling it was all about him and what *he* was going through. I got an explanation, not an apology, and it was total bullshit. My parents had little to offer beyond asking, almost in passing, if I was okay. A little embarrassed, I, of course, said I was fine. What else was I going to say? That's the way it went being in a family of 10 kids. What happened to you wasn't all that important, especially when it might force someone to be accountable for their actions. Or if it made your parents question the people and the institution they'd believed in all of their life.

And what about that institution? The stunning lack of courage by the Catholic church, whose foundations are built on one of history's most courageous figures, is incalculable. Since these sexual abuse scandals began to come to light in the early 2000s, the church has hidden behind protocols established by the Vatican that allows it to claim transparency from behind darkened windows in Rome. They look out for their brand as if they were a Fortune 500 company, offering fake apologies, hiding settlements like Cayman Island oligarchs, while trying to bury those who would hold them accountable.

That is why, almost 50 years later, I am coming forward: the refusal of the church to adequately provide closure to this recurring nightmare, which I am forced to relive every couple of years as they duck and cover from their responsibility and fail to provide just compensation to victims. I'm sick of this and I want it to end. Rather than just sit here, eternally pissed off, I am now adding my voice to the chorus of voices who demand the fucking Catholic church make this shit right.

Even with the blight of the never-ending scandal, my present life is stable and rich in many ways. My wife and I are seeing our kids through the latter stages of college. Though I never quite made it through to a degree, I did learn to love books. And, as a result of a lot of reading and life slowing down, I started to write myself and had my first novel published in 2016, and I have several other writing projects in the works. Absent the abuse and a few other pieces of the puzzle this all may have happened for me decades earlier. But, I'll take this present life that is so busy and full of meaning and purpose.

As for my brothers, they have had their share of ups and downs, but have come out on the other side doing quite well, with their own stories to tell.

And, despite the numerous scars, I believe in Dr. Martin Luther King's maxim: *the arc of moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*. Along with my brothers and other lost abused souls, I am here to demand our justice. I am here to insist on a full accounting in the light of day by the church and the predators that abused us. I am here to reclaim what was taken from us when we were least able to protect ourselves. I am here to wash away the shame, humiliation, and lost potential. I am here to be made whole.

P. A. Kane lives in West Seneca with his wife and three college-age children. He is the author of the 2016 novel [Written In The Stars: The Book of Molly](#).

COMMENTS

10 Comments

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Add a comment...



Paul Morgan

powerful. you're a courageous soul, and a gifted writer. you've made so many important observations on the problems of our culture ~ from parenting, to the abject hypocrisy of American Xtians, to the complex, life long issues of surviving abuse, and being the victim of a pedophilic nature.

i join you in demanding the church be held accountable, and i damn any Catholic who drops to their knees at the alter of this 24k hypocrisy.
the rank and file laity have failed miserably to step up and make the moral demands of this church that are required by common decency, criminal statute, and our colle... See More

Like · Reply · 11 · 2w · Edited



Jennifer Baran-Sawynsky

I am personally proud of you P.A. Kane for this piece. I had my own problems with Holy Family Parish/School but nothing compared to this. I wish I could have been a closer friend & confidante that I could have helped in some way. instead we partied til we passed out & not much gets discussed. I thought you (& the guys) were so cool because you had such a vast record collection. it's easy to get high & get lost in the music. I applaud your courage to write about your experience in order to help others & it does.

Like · Reply · 4 · 2w



Judy Block-Jones

Very powerful and courageous...Thank you..

Like · Reply · 3 · 1w



Neil Mahar

People don't realize how much it was discouraged to ever let these stories see the light of day.

Like · Reply · 2 · 1w



Abbie Fitzgerald Schaub

On behalf of "The Keepers" (Netflix documentary) I want to thank you for this beautifully written piece. I am sorry you were harmed.

Like · Reply · 3 · 1w



Bruce Kogan

A very moving story indeed, It needs to be told. Quite right that in the days before Stonewall, a lot of Ron Silverio's gravitated to the priesthood. Depending on how long ago this happened statutes of limitation apply and Silverio is not with any LGBTQ organizations or AIDS groups like Evergreen so he can't be fired. He was shunned by many already before this story and I suspect more will do so.

Like · Reply · 1w



Sylvia H Nadler

This is the first I heard of Ron Silverio within this context. He was someone I knew in high school. How devastating that he turned out to be a cruel abusive monster that attached children and families. There is a place waiting for him in hell. You are a powerful writer and show great courage in surviving and speaking out

Like · Reply · 1w



Ablejack Courtney

There is no prevalence of child abuse particular to a vocation in the Roman Catholic Church. Horribly, occurrences of child abuse happen everywhere. Protestant Churches, Scout groups, Public schools, etc. wherever there are children in the charge of adults. The Catholic Church however is the ONLY institution that accepts responsibility for this sort of abuse. That is the reason the Church is often so villified in this way. It is not that the Church does not take responsibility; it is that they do.

Like · Reply · 1w



Paul Morgan

that is a complete lie.
they spent 2 MILLION DOLLARS last year seeking to EVADE legal responsibility for their priests!

shame on your ignorance.

last year the Catholic Diocese spent over 2 MILLION dollars trying to stifle the justice of your fellow victims. they lobbied hard, with money from collection plates, to fight the Child Victims Act, which among other things, would extend the statute of limitations for prosecuting children sex offenders.

<https://buffalonews.com/.../catholic-bishops-ramp-up.../>

Like · Reply · 1w



Ablejack Courtney

Paul Morgan Everyone in the US has the right to the best available legal defense.
This is grade school civics; "Shame on your ignorance."

Like · Reply · 1w



Sarah Kleman

The difference is the coverup and enabling. That is unique to the Catholic Church and that is the opposite of taking responsibility. I want to assume that you are exercising due diligence and reading about Cardinal McCarrick and that you have read the Philadelphia and Altoona-Johnstown Grand Jury Reports. Let's stay tuned for the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report . Let us know what you think after that one comes out.

Like · Reply · 1 · 5d



Sarah Kleman

Wow. Best statement on Catholic Church sexual abuse of children I have ever read. I've been reading about it since 1998 when my cousin killed herself because she got kicked out of the family after reporting that a priest molested her. This is the best portrayal of the dynamics in a big Catholic family that I've ever read. It also hits close to home. I grew up in the Rochester Diocese. It was pretty common there for the priest to molest the boys and the boys to molest the girls. And everyone get up and go to school and pretend that nothing's going on.

In my 20th year of reading about t... See More

Like · Reply · 5d



Sarah Kleman

Forgot to say that I remember those Todd Rundgren songs also. And wouldn't it be nice if the Buffalo Diocese examination were to spread to the Diocese of Rochester. And, hey, throw in Syracuse because these three seem to be connected.

Like · Reply · 5d

THE PUBLIC

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