

"A Kind of Family" was first published in Armarolla Magazine

A Kind of Family

By Antaeus

In 1954, I was a nine-year-old altar boy at our local Catholic Church. If you don't know what an altar boy is, he's the young fellow that kneels on the altar behind the priest. He's the one wearing a black robe and white top that smells of twenty-year-old sweat and body odor.

The six-o'clock morning mass with Father David, the priest in charge of the altar boys, had just ended, and we were walking into the sacristy. (A room in a church where a priest prepares for a service, and where vestments and other things used in worship are kept.)

Father David had his arm around my shoulders.

Once inside the sacristy, Father David began removing his vestments. (A robe worn by the clergy during services.)

The altar boy's changing area was located on the other side of the altar, so I headed that way. The room was reached by a hidden corridor that ran behind the altar.

I had just hung up my vestments and walked out of that corridor when Father David grabbed my arm. He was wearing a black robe.

The young priest said that there was some sacramental wine left in the bottle, and he asked if I thought I could handle a shot. The priest was smiling as he held out a short water glass that was about a third full.

I'd worked in my uncle's bar cleaning the toilets since I was seven, and I knew what a typical shot looked like. To my eye, it looked more like three ounces, not one.

Asking a nine-year-old boy if he thinks you can handle alcohol is like drawing a line and saying, "I dare you to cross it."

Without answering, I grabbed the glass and took a sip. My face scrunched up like a prune.

Father David smiled and said something to the effect that sacred wine tasted terrible. The trick is to just drink it straight down in one gulp.

Putting action to words, he downed his in one gulp. When he turned around to refill his glass, I dumped mine into the pot of a nearby flower arrangement.

Father David turned around, saw the empty glass and smiled again. As he took it from my hands, he said that one of the other altar boys told him that my friends called me Butch.

I replied in the affirmative.

Father David poured another drink and said that the same person also told him I wanted to be a priest.

I replied that I did, and it was the reason I became an altar boy. I wanted to learn the different masses and how to speak Latin.

We talked for a while, and I pretended to sip my drink. It was my experience at the bar that most people looked at the action of drinking, while bartenders looked at the level in the glass.

When the priest turned around to pour his third refill, I dumped mine again. Standing, I told Father David I had to go, as I didn't want to be late for school.

He ignored what I said and told me that wanting to be a priest is a great goal. He went on to ask me to have breakfast with him at the rectory. (a residence of a rector or a parish priest.) He said he'd tell Sister Francis, the school principal, that I was going to spend the rest of the day with him. That way he could talk to me about my vocation.

I Thought that would be great.

No school! Hot dog wait until the guys hear about this, I remember thinking.

Then Father David's face became stern.

He said that since we're talking about learning to become a priest, I should know that I stumbled on some of my Latin responses that day.

The truth was that I had faltered a little, but only because he had mumbled some new Latin phrases that I didn't know the correct response to.

I started to give my excuse, but Father David cut me off. He said there were no excuses and I knew what the punishment was for messing up my Latin.

I knew the punishment only too well, having undergone it numerous times. The penalty wasn't too bad, in fact, it didn't hurt anywhere near as much as the beatings I got from my father. Basically, all you had to do was recite the Confiteor (so named from its first words, "I confess"), in Latin, while you lay across Father's knees with your pants down and were spanked. In the 50's, that was a perfectly acceptable form of punishment.

So, I dropped my pants and lay on Father David's knees. Usually, Father David just gave you a soft whack on one cheek or the other, and said, "This is your penance."

Then he would rub where he had hit you and say, "This is God's forgiveness."

This usually lasted until you had finished saying the Confiteor in Latin. I could recite it pretty fast.

This time was different, though, instead of whacking me, he immediately pulled my underpants aside, and stuck his finger where it didn't belong. I jumped off his knees and had my pants up faster than Superman could don his uniform.

Had the incident ended there, I would have gone on my way and just avoided Father David from then on. It didn't. Father David stood up and unbuttoned his robe. He was naked

underneath and had an erection. He took a step toward me.

I honestly do not have any recollection of exactly what happened next. When I try to remember, it's like watching one of those old black and white movies that jump around the screen. You know, the ones where the film is so badly deteriorated that some scenes are missing. One second Father David was coming at me, and the next he was on the floor puking and holding onto his testicles.

What I do vividly remember, is crying as I ran out of the sacristy as fast as I could. As I ran to my uncle's bar a mile away, I was thinking about how my soul was now damned to burn in hell for all eternity.

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On the way to tell my father what had happened, I ran into my best friend and fellow altar boy, Peter. Of all the other guys that we hung out with, Peter, Joseph and I were the closest. We'd known each other since kindergarten and were more than friends, we were family.

I waved to Peter, crossed the street, and asked where he was going.

It was nippy out, and Pete wiped his nose on the sleeve of his school uniform jacket before he told me he had an eight o'clock mass with Father Francis.

When Peter noticed my red eyes, he asked me what was up with me. He teased me, asking me if my dad had hit me and made me cry.

I told him "No" but that he needed to stay away from Father David.

He asked why, so I told him what had happened.

When I had finished telling Peter what had transpired, he just shook his head from side-to-side. Then he told me that I was probably going straight to hell when I died.

He said that Monsignor Anthony had told him that priests were the hand of God on Earth. That what they said was the word of God and whatever they did was by the will of God. Even

more importantly, anything that we said or did to them, we said or did to God.

I told him he was probably right, but I was going to tell my dad what had happened anyway.

Peter grabbed me and shook me.

He said everyone believed that priests could do no wrong. On top of that, we confessed our sins to the priests and asked for God's forgiveness. If the priests didn't forgive our sins, we went to purgatory or hell. Then he asked me, who I thought my father would believe, me or the priest that has the power to send him to hell?

I thought about it for a minute, running scenario after scenario through my head. I told Peter I would keep my mouth shut, but I wasn't going back to being an altar boy.

Then I asked Peter if he was going to stay an altar boy after what I had just told him.

Peter hung his head and sat on a step of a nearby stoop (porch). He started to cry and told me it was too late for him. That he'd already been purified multiple times.

I was shocked, I didn't know what to do. Guys didn't cry in front of other guys. So I sat down next to him and put my arm around his shoulders. I asked him if it had been by Father David. He said "Yes," and some of the other priests also. "That's the worst part," he said between sobs, "Father David likes to be the first, then after he's done with you, the others pass you around."

When he told me the names of the other three priests that he had been shared with, I was beside myself. I remember thinking that it was just too big a thing to keep quiet about.

I told Peter that we had to say something to our parents. That if we both told them what had happened, maybe they would believe us.

Peter told me to "Get real" that even if all ten of us altar boys told our parents, they

wouldn't believe us. Even if by some miracle, they did believe us, did I think our parents would say anything, or do anything about it? What had happened to us would bring disgrace to our families' names. Our parents would disown us before they'd let that happen.

I remember pacing back and forth in front of Peter like a caged lion looking for a way to escape. Eventually, I asked Peter what we should do.

He said that we should do nothing, and that our conversation had never taken place. I told Peter that I understood, and we pinkie swore that it was our secret until one of us died.

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When I reached my uncle's bar, I looked in the window before going in. I saw my father talking to Father George, one of the "bad" priests Peter had mentioned. I went home instead.

There was a beating coming my way, and I knew it. How bad it was going to be hung on what the priest had just told my father.

As it turned out, Father George had told my dad that I had been expelled from the altar boys because I had cursed on the altar during mass.

I remember thinking to myself, so priests do lie. I decided that if I said anything, it would just make things worse. So, I stood silently looking down at the floor. My father took my non-response as an admission of guilt and removed his belt.

It was one of the worst beatings I ever got. My father beat me until my legs buckled. My butt and thighs were bloody when it was over, and I limped for a week.

As I lay curled up in a corner, my father said that I was a disgrace to the family, and I was on bread and water for breakfast and lunch, with no supper for three days. I was also barred from going outside with my friends after school for a month. I was only allowed to work in the bar before and after school, and I had to go right home afterward.

My mother came in and washed the blood away with rubbing alcohol. I don't know what

hurt me more, the beating or the sting of the alcohol.

Peter was right, it was a good thing I didn't say anything about what the priests were doing. My father or one of my uncles would have probably killed me.

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The next day Peter ran up to me as I limped to school. He told me that everyone in the neighborhood knew I had cursed in front of Christ on the altar.

I reminded Peter that it was a load of crap, and he knew it. That's it was something that Father George had made up.

He reminded me that he had warned me things would get worse for me. Then he said that Father George was the worst of all the priests. That he liked to get rough with the older boys, and that sometimes he could hear them scream when he was in one of the other priest's rooms.

Then Peter did something I'll remember until my dying day. He reached into his pocket and took out a crumbling corn muffin with black lint on it and handed it to me. He said he'd also split his lunch with me.

I hugged my friend and sniffed back the tears. I told him he was a great brother.

There had been no dinner for me the night before, and no breakfast that morning. I was so hungry the smell of the muffin made me drool.

On our way to school, I stuffed the whole corn muffin into my mouth. Peter laughed until he doubled over, then put his arm around my shoulders. All was right with the world, at least for the next twenty minutes or so.

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Just as I finished folding my jacket and sitting on it, Sister Francis walked into the classroom. She made a beeline straight for my desk, and she told me that the Monsignor Anthony wanted to see me in his office, right away.

I asked Sister Francis why he wanted to see me, and she replied that she had no idea why. She was just told to send me to the rectory as soon as I got to school.

I looked hard into her eyes, and she looked away. Liar. She knew.

When I reached the rectory, I knocked at the door and walked into the Monsignor's office. That's when Father George grabbed my arm before I could turn and run.

He called me a "little shit," and he told me he could do to me what I had done Father David. No one would say a word, he threatened. Then he drew back his fist, and I tensed my muscles. Father George had big fists; depending on where the punch landed this was going to hurt—probably a lot. Before he could throw the punch, though, Father Brian burst into the Monsignor's office. He yelled at Father George to let me go, and to get out of the room immediately.

Father Brian was new to the parish, and he was one of the good priests. Rumor was that he had been in the war and killed a lot of people. That's why he was a priest. At least that was the story going around the school. Father George was big, at least to my nine-year-old eyes, but Father Brian was huge. I could tell Father George was afraid of Father Brian. Just like I could recognize that Father George was actually going to hit me.

It's in the eyes, it's always in their eyes. I saw the fear in Father George's eyes when he let me go and almost ran out of the room.

After Father George had left, Father Brian told me to sit down on a soft chair. He promised me that no one was going to bother me anymore. He had seen enough, and he wanted to put a stop to it. Father Brian said he didn't think he couldn't stop it completely, but he could make sure that no one else in this parish was hurt.

He promised me that after we finished talking, he was going to go to my uncle's bar and

"fix things" with my father. I was under his protection now, and no one would bother me. He planned to tell my father that Father George had been mistaken, that it wasn't me who had cursed in front of the altar.

A small lie to fix a bigger one.

Father Brian reached out to touch my hand in sympathy, and I involuntarily pulled it away.

He sat back in the chair, entwined his fingers, and placed his hands on his lap.

He looked me right in the eyes when he told me that in the Bible, the word "church" never refers to a building, but always to people.

"People are the church, and people are fallible," he said. He tried to explain to me that even priests make mistakes. I could tell he believed what he was saying, but I wasn't buying it.

Then he asked me not to abandon the church because of a few sick people.

I lied and told him I wouldn't and went back to class.

A small lie to make the man who had saved me from a beating feel better.

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Things went back to almost normal after Father Brian straightened everything out. A month after my eleventh birthday my parents divorced, and my mother moved with us kids to an inner-city housing project. A few months after that, I heard that that Father Brian had been transferred to another parish. So much for keeping the other boys safe, I thought to myself.

The next time I saw Peter was at our friend Joseph's funeral. Joseph was older than Peter and me, so he had been abused longer. Everyone said he had fallen from the roof of a building. Peter and I both knew Joseph had killed himself and why, but we couldn't tell anyone.

After the funeral, Peter promised to stay in touch with me, but he never did. I promised Joseph I would kill Father David. I figured I was going to hell anyway, so I might as well take

Father David with me.

Living in "The Project," as we called it, was rough, but I learned a lot of ways to hurt people. I had taken to inserting a double-edged razor blade halfway into the sole of my shoe on the outside. When school was over for the day, and everyone was crowding out the door, all I had to do was "accidentally " run the side of my shoe across someone's leg, and they were bleeding. I could have cut their Achilles tendon and crippled them, but I never did it. Mainly because no one pissed me off enough.

I've often wished I had a razor blade in my shoe when I kicked Father David.

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Joining the military at sixteen-and-a-half saved me from a potential life of crime and violence. While in the service, I learned discipline, respect for authority, how to control my temper, and how to channel my hate into positive work. I also learned how to kill. I thought about Father David the whole time.

In December of 1963, I was home on Christmas leave. My mission was to visit the old neighborhood, just for old times' sake. Not really; I was looking for Father David. Most of the kids I knew from the old neighborhood had either died from drug overdoses or were in jail. So, I was on my own.

It was a Friday night, and if Father David was still on his old schedule, he would be leaving around seven to spend the weekend in New York with his friends. I had a 32-caliber pistol in the pocket of my coat. I had picked it up while in Naples, Italy, and it was virtually untraceable. One double tap to the head and God would judge Father David.

I waited around in the cold until about nine o'clock, then figured Father David was a no-show. On my way back to my father's place, I ran into Peter.

I almost didn't recognize my friend. Peter didn't look like himself at all. His face was

gaunt, with crazy wild eyes, and he smelled like he hadn't bathed in weeks. The man would have walked right by me if I hadn't put my hand on his shoulder to stop him.

He jumped a foot in the air at my touch.

I told him that it was me, Butchie, and I asked if he remembered me. I could see Peter struggling to remember, but the drugs had clouded his mind. He was just starting off into space.

I shook him a little and told him it was me again, that I had thought he had gone off to a seminary to study for the priesthood.

I finally saw recognition in his eyes, and he told me that the same abuse went on there.

When I asked him if he knew where Father David was, the look in his eyes got even crazier. He started to laugh, and he told me they had made Father David a Monsignor. That he was now in Rome on a fast track to becoming a Cardinal.

Peter started laughing a strange laugh as he walked away, and I decided not to stop him.

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Fast forward to late 1965. A month after I had been discharged from the military, I went to Peter's parents' house looking for him. I wanted to renew our friendship and see if I could help him in some way.

When I arrived Peter's, his parents informed me that on New Year's Eve in 1963, just six days after we had talked, Peter had gone down to the PATH train station and deliberately stepped in front of a subway train. They said he hadn't left a note, and no one knew why he did it.

I knew why, but I didn't have the heart to tell them.

Perhaps if I had been able to kill Father David that day, Peter would still be alive. Maybe knowing that one of his rapists was dead would have given him some peace of mind.

I'll never know, and it still bothers me even after all these years. Sometimes I see Pete's crazy eyes in my dreams.

All these years later, this traumatizing betrayal of trust by my priest or "The Incident," as I've come to call it, is still vivid in my mind. It, and the events that followed it, have replayed in my nightmares for most of my life. Even over 60 years later, I can still recall almost every word and every action that took place.

To me, The Incident is akin to an old piece of baggage that one carries around through life. You never show it to anyone because it looks horrible in the daylight. The ugly thing ends up being moved from one home to another, just because you've always had it.

That nasty memory serves no useful purpose, it just sits up in your attic taking up space. The only time you think about it is when you're up there looking for other things. Then, like a jack-in-the-box, it gets in your face, and you must forcibly shove it aside. That's when the nightmares begin in earnest.

A shrink told me that one of the best therapies for psychological trauma is to write about it. I have no idea if this will work, but I've been lugging this piece of baggage around for too long. It's time to bring it out in the sunlight and toss it in the trash where it belongs.

So, here I sit, all these years later, writing my story. Having written it, do I feel better? I really can't say. What I do know is that these are the hardest words I have ever had to write.

I wrote them for Peter and Joseph, and yes, for myself as well. Perhaps now that the old piece of baggage is out in the daylight, I will see how useless it is and toss it and forget what happened. Maybe even move on.

Bullshit!

Who am I kidding? I'll never forget because there's a habit I've developed over the years. Whenever I meet a new friend or acquaintance, the subject of religion will eventually come up. If they're Catholic, I ask the husband if he was ever an altar boy. I watch his eyes when he answers.

The truth is there, in their eyes, and I can see it. Not all of them were abused, but the ones that were abused can see the truth in my eyes too. We are family after all.



The Bigger Picture

The Catholic Church is a very powerful organization. Despite all the proof and an apology by the Pope, there are still people who refuse to believe any sexual abuse happened.

Not everyone who was abused has come forward to tell their story. I can't blame the victims, My friend and I pretended nothing happened for almost sixty-three years.

No one knows for sure, but statistically, in America alone, there may have been as many as 100,000 victims of clerical sexual abuse.

In 2014, Pope Francis established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors to address sexual abuse by clergy members. Finally, I thought, the church has admitted that some of its priests are pedophiles, and something will be done about it.

Three years later, in 2017 the Vatican's inability to deal with the moral challenge posed by pedophile priests and the bishops who enabled them caused the church to do nothing to the perpetrators. Even minor steps toward reform, urged by the commission and adopted by Pope Francis, were met with official contempt by the bishops.

Because Catholics are in denial, the victims of sexual abuse by priests still suffer the verbal abuse of these "Christians." Some of the victims, who have come forth, have even been accused of being in league with the Devil or moreover, that they deliberately tempted the priests to fall from grace. Once again, the victims of rape are being blamed for the crimes of the rapist.

