

# That Eyes May Finally See

A testament about adult clergy abuse

Michael Gerard Johnson with David Weiss

*Dedicated to St. Odilia, Patroness of the Eyes*

## **Prologue: The Weight of Clouds** (6/10/15)

I met Mike Johnson in late February 2014. At the time he still had an impish humor to him despite the years of heartache he had endured and the health issues that were exacting their own toll. As we strolled the grounds of the Crosier Preparatory School and later chatted amiably over lunch in his home, we were both keenly aware of the tempest in his past. It was to be the subject of a shared project in the months ahead. But we were both in our own ways oblivious to the tempest rising in his body that would claim his life in less than four months.

Now I am, as it were, a witness. Once asked, and now beholden to speak. Mike shared his story with me, filled in with letters, documents, and memories, not so I could hear it, but so I could *tell it*. As a writer, I occasionally step, uninvited, into lives other than my own. At times in poetry, fiction, or essay, I have dared to speak for others. But this particular stepping is invited, even *commissioned*. In this case, *Mike* dared me to do this. And so this time it comes with a heightened responsibility to hold another person's life at my fingertips, knowing he is counting on me to tell the truth of it.

Of course, when we started, neither of us counted on him dying—at least not so soon or so precipitously. But such is death: it reschedules everything. So this tale has been on hiatus for months. Allowing for grief to have its say. For lives to readjust their arc to this yawning absence.

But now, as the anniversary of Mike's death (June 24, 2014) approaches, and with pages of notes scattered before me, and so many half-composed sentences inside me, it's time to complete the tale I began last spring. Only these days I write, not with Mike's editorial hand next to mine, but with that hand woven into the weight of clouds.

## **Beginning at the Edge: Saint Odilia**

Sometimes you find hope in unexpected places, and this is one of those tales. Mike attended the Crosier Prep School in Onamia during the seventies. His days there as a teen strengthened him spiritually. Besides receiving an excellent education, the Crosiers implanted in Mike a profound sense of social responsibility and a deep respect for other faith traditions. He never felt a calling to ministry, but the roots of his Catholic faith grew deep during those years.

Although, like many, he learned later that there were several incidents of sexual abuse by priests against boys at the school during the years he attended, he states emphatically, “no priest ever abused me while I was there.” The abuse Mike experienced from a priest came almost twenty years later, and then from a priest that never even laid a hand on him. It was Mike’s wife that he laid hands on. But this priest’s actions—and the Church’s determined blindness to them—shattered his marriage, alienated his children, and shook his faith.

The irony is that it was Mike’s return to Onamia about eight years ago, in particular his visits to a school and seminary now shuttered, that helped his faith find healing. In the Holy Cross Center, just outside the doors to the chapel where he attended daily Mass throughout high school, you find the shrine to Saint Odilia, Protectress of the Crosiers. Because of miraculous cures associated with her relics, she is also known as Patroness of the Eyes—able to restore sight.

Mike figures he always knew the tale of Saint Odilia. It is, after all, on full display—the story captured frame by frame—in the chapel’s stained glass windows. But today, this fourth century martyr and saint has gained special meaning for him. *It’s time for Mike’s story to be told.* And he hopes that once more Saint Odilia can restore sight, within the Church, within his family, and among all the faithful, *so that eyes may finally see.*

## **Seeds of Faith**

Born and raised in a small community just outside of Duluth, Mike grew up in a family that blessed him with the gift of faith. His mother was Catholic, his dad was Lutheran; he converted to Catholicism when Mike was a teenager. The home was imbued with a low-key faith, quiet, but firm; Mike regarded himself as a “DNA Catholic,” a religious worldview written into his heart. Cognizant in recent years of the many challenges bound up with Catholic beliefs—even of the crisis in Catholic faith unfolding across many fronts, Mike credited his Catholic faith for the bedrock for his conviction that “all of us are equal, all of us are special, and all of us are worthy of respect and love.”

Religious diversity was different up there and back then. Their small community had two different Catholic parishes and two different Lutheran parishes, each distinct in ethnic roots and fine print beliefs. But to Mike and his classmates, religion was religion, and respect was mutual. The differences that mattered to them as kids were the varying church schedules that impacted availability for sandlot baseball, fishing adventures, or weekend get-togethers.

Mike’s Catholic faith was always important to him, even as a child. Traditional family bedtime prayers often continued as “conversational prayers with God” long after the “Amen” had been uttered and lights turned out. As he grew, he remembers a rhythm of silent prayer that kept pace throughout the day. Not because anyone instructed him to do so, but because that rhythm somehow resonated with his soul. And did so until his dying day.

Along with the rest of his family, Mike attended their Catholic parish each Sunday and for Holy Days of Obligation. He found worship inspiring and, as soon as he was old enough, he began to serve as an altar boy. These were the days of traditional attire, Latin prayers; the Mass had not yet been fully reshaped by the changes of Vatican II. He was thrilled, honored, excited—an enthusiasm that often made him a last-minute substitute, called forth from a front pew to fill in for an altar boy who had failed to show.

Because his father was regular in attending the Catholic church long before he formally converted, Mike confessed surprise at realizing as a preteen, that his dad had been Lutheran up until then. And then he recounted with quiet relish the sense of sacred wonder he experienced while serving as an altar boy on the day when both his younger sister and his dad received their first communion. Deeper than words could say, Mike felt blessed to be such an active participant in their faith journeys as well as his own.

Once, at a Saturday Mass, Brother Steve, a Crosier, gave a dynamic presentation about the Crosier Seminary High School and Preparatory School. Mike was instantly interested, and his parents arranged for him to attend a summer “Expo” camp in Onamia run by the Crosiers, which he did from the time he was 12-14 years old, followed by “Look-Ahead” 3-day retreats at the school each fall. These were a blast—in the best possible ways. Fun, fellowship, and friends all intersected with FAITH. Mike began to wonder if he might want to be a priest. It was an innocent and honest question at the time, and even though the answer proved to be No, that question led him to make what he regarded as one of the best choices of his life: he asked to go to the Crosier Prep School for high school.

Thus, in the seventies, Mike did attend Crosier Prep School. This was no easy thing, because it meant living hours away from home—and it meant paying tuition that his parents could not easily afford. Somehow the money came together (Mike said one of the Crosier brothers helped secure scholarship aid for him), and he joined the community of boys pursuing education and vocation side by side in Onamia with zeal and with joy.

As acknowledged earlier, clearly these days were not so joyful for everyone. And while the vast majority of Crosier priests and brothers were men of integrity and faith, it’s now known that there were a handful who abused boys during these years. Mike never made any excuses for that; like all clergy abuse, it troubled him deeply, but it wasn’t his experience at Crosier.

In that sort of counterpoint that bears witness to God’s capacity to work good even in settings tarnished by human weakness, Mike would say that, for him—and by the grace of God—Crosier *grew* his faith. From the classroom, where his mind was fed and his imagination stretched, to the gymnasium where the boys played with reckless joyful energy, *this place was good to him*. (I put that in italics, because as we strolled the grounds that day, Mike spoke “in italics” the entire time!) Together the students were their own close-knit community, with ritual and routines: daily Mass, evening Vespers, the bustle of the cafeteria, the treats and treasures of the school’s own little general store. They were also mischief at times: catching bats in laundry sheets then throwing them down the laundry chute and

waiting for the shrieks when the bats were “liberated” the next day by the laundry staff. Or sneaking into chapel late by crawling forward on their bellies under the pews, occasionally getting caught by an eagle-eyed brother perched up in the balcony. Mike described the camaraderie as reminiscent of a M\*A\*S\*H unit, replete with jokes, pranks, and an unshakeable sense of brotherhood. In the midst of such antics, the boys worked hard on their studies, and Mike remained convinced that the discipline, academic rigor, and mutual care that were nurtured at Crosier helped lay the foundation for each boy’s later vocation, clerical or otherwise.

Such fond memories aren’t simply window dressing for a childhood; for Mike they were both the warp and woof of his maturing faith back then and, later on, the remnant pattern for the faith being re-woven from rags.

By the end of Mike’s first year at Crosier puberty hit and any real fascination with the priesthood as a calling lost out to the rush of adolescent hormones. As Mike put it, “I believe *either* celibacy *or* marriage can be godly choices, but by the end of that year, and not without plenty of prayer, I knew which choice was godly for me—and most of my classmates.” After that first year Mike left Crosier for a quarter, switching to a school back in Duluth. But Crosier had called his name, and he returned mid-year and continued there until he graduated in 1978. Along the way, in the midst of all the hard work, daily worship, and happy mischief, his faith flourished with respect for others and an abiding commitment to the common good. He left Crosier ready for the world.

### **Marriage – Life Full of Promise**

After high school Mike attended the College of St. Scholastica back in Duluth for two years. During that time he met Deborah. They fell in love, and in 1980 they were married. Like most young couples they had their share of challenges. Beginning life together at age twenty, each of them had their own fair share growing up still to do, even as they quickly became parents with a family to support. Yes, there were ups and downs, but on the whole—even as he looked back across a couple decades of unimaginable anguish—Mike declared that in those first years there were decidedly *more* ups than downs. It was a *good* if not perfect marriage (and is any marriage ever really perfect?). And a marriage that before long blossomed into a family with five beautiful children.

For work Mike started out in insurance and eventually wound up in marketing and development—he would describe himself as “a finance guy with a big heart. I was good at what I did because I enjoyed my work and believed in the companies I worked for.” His jobs took them first to Berne, Wisconsin, then to the Twin Cities, and finally, in 1987 to Sauk Rapids, Minnesota.

Unbeknownst to either Mike or Deborah, this last move would prove deadly to their marriage. Worse, its demise came about not because they strayed from the Church, but

because they trusted their lives and their love too much to the Church. Perhaps they should have seen it coming. But at the time the goodness of their faith blinded them to the danger of a priest acting in bad faith. O, Saint Odilia, restore our clarity of vision and truth even now—for all of us!

### **A Truth Learned Too Late**

When Mike and Deborah moved to Sauk Rapids they registered with Sacred Heart parish, at the time served by Father Daniel Taufen. Initially their family thrived there. Mike was working in development for the Crosier Community in Onamia, giving back, as it were, to the place that had given so much to him. The same year they moved to Sauk Rapids (1987) another couple got married at Sacred Heart Church. Ben and Cheryl Statz were devoted to their faith and quite involved in the parish. They were a happy family. For both families life seemed full of promise. But in June 1992 seeming promise became certain peril.

There are moments in stories when a certain stillness creeps into the text so that an ominous shift in the plotline seems imminent. *That moment is now.*

At the start of June 1992 Father Tony Oelrich, newly ordained, replaced Father Taufen. [Editor's note: I wrestle with whether to call him "Father Tony" (as he was known to parishioners) in this narrative or simply "Oelrich"—as a tacit way of dismissing his clergy status. He seemingly dismissed the sanctity of his vows almost immediately, but I will refer to him as "Father Tony" nonetheless, because using his priestly title here makes the contradiction between his priestly office and vows and his repeated behavior unbearable—as it should be.]

Although Mike and Deborah knew Ben and Cheryl casually from parish activities already, they became closer friends in 1992 when both couples participated alongside each other in prayer groups organized by Father Tony. Unfortunately (an understatement if ever there was one) Mike learned far too late about Cheryl's experience with Father Tony that very first summer. It was the writing on the wall, but, hidden from view by Cheryl's own fear and shame, he learned this truth too late.

It is shared now—and with Cheryl's permission—because it shows how quickly Father Tony became predatory and because it makes clear that his behavior toward Deborah was part of an unfolding pattern. *And because for someone else it may not yet be too late.*

Father Tony met Cheryl while she was at the church saying the rosary, a practice she did almost daily. At first their conversations ranged across religion, family, and personal spirituality. Cheryl respected him and appreciated his interest in caring for her spiritual life. Soon, already within his first month serving as priest at Sacred Heart, Father Tony asked to come visit Cheryl and her husband at their home. Over a meal all three of them talked more about church and spiritual growth.

Then, for the remainder June and continuing through July and into August, Father Tony developed the habit of just “dropping by” their home—three or four times each week—and often when Ben (who did shift work) wasn’t there. By July Father Tony shifted the topic of conversation from spiritual matters to more mundane and far less appropriate topics: complimenting Cheryl on her looks, making very specific remarks about her eyes, face, and body. He began asking Cheryl inappropriate questions about her intimate life with Ben. He invaded her personal space, positioning himself so that their legs touched while they talked, resting his hands on her behind when hugging good-bye. She was extremely, frantically distressed, constantly retreating (both physically and spiritually), but she kept telling herself, “He’s a priest, he can’t be doing anything wrong.” But she told no one else.

After his visits, Cheryl often found herself praying and crying, asking herself and God, “What is going on here?! What is he trying to do to me?!” Her respect for Father Tony was collapsing. Worse, her faith in God was faltering as well.

One day in August 1992 Father Tony came over and, as usual, sat down uncomfortably close to Cheryl to talk. Suddenly he placed his hand high on her thigh, and just as suddenly Cheryl jerked away from him. He moved to a different chair and beckoned her to come over to him there. (Even in such a scary and confusing moment, how does one not “obey” a priest?) When she did, he reached over and snapped her bra strap, asking through his nervous laughter, “What’s this?” Cheryl was visibly distraught—terrified, both emotionally and spiritually—and after a few more awkward remarks Father Tony left.

That night she couldn’t sleep at all and resolved to confront Father Tony in her husband Ben’s presence the next day. She called Father Tony on the phone and invited him to stop by. When he did, she yelled at him in anger and disgust, naming his inappropriate behaviors toward her and asking him, “What the hell are you doing to me?!” Father Tony immediately went down on his knees, saying how sorry he was and beseeching both Cheryl and Ben for forgiveness.

In retrospect, Mike believed every woman in that prayer group had been a potential target. Cheryl’s practice of praying the rosary at church and her husband’s shift work made her an easy first target. Father Tony probably never expected Cheryl to name and reject his advances so directly—and in her husband’s presence. But that push-back cost her dearly.

After that episode Cheryl’s life went into a tailspin. She found herself nauseous when she watched Father Tony preside at Mass. Before long she stopped going to church altogether, her faith in tatters. Unfortunately, Ben, whose brother was a priest in the same diocese, was not supportive of Cheryl during her trauma. Instead, driven by an unhealthy loyalty to church as institution, he tried to convince her to just forget about it and move on. Unable to do so, she fell into a severe depression—even needing to be hospitalized. Two years after these incidents with Father Tony she and Ben filed for divorce—the primary reason being her “loss of faith.”

At the time, neither Mike nor Deborah knew any of this. Eventually, Mike heard second-hand that Father Tony “couldn’t go over to Cheryl’s house anymore,” and he sensed there was “something more” to this, but by the time he put all these pieces together, his own marriage was in pieces as well. Two years later, Deborah herself would be so thoroughly under Father Tony’s sway that she testified *against Cheryl* in regards to her fitness as a mother.

Cheryl’s family and faith were irreparably damaged by Father Tony, so it’s hard to identify a silver lining in all of this. Perhaps it’s simply that after the confrontation in August 1992 Father Tony never showed up at Cheryl and Ben’s home again. But that’s a very slim silver lining, because not long after these events, Father Tony showed up at Mike and Deborah’s home.

### **The Gathering Storm**

Within months Father Tony’s attention was directed to another woman from that summer prayer group: Deborah. Mike does not know exactly when the advances began, and it seems likely that Father Tony moved a bit more cautiously this time. Still, by late 1992 Mike could sense a new distance between himself and his wife. They had five children by then, ranging in age from three to eleven. Life was hectic. Married people are human. Deborah remained very tied in her family of origin, a tight-knit family that, even after twelve years of marriage, had never really embraced Mike. Mike, meanwhile, worked long hours and used alcohol more than was wise to unwind. It was not a perfect marriage. But—and the font size should make that “BUT” fill the page—nothing excuses a priest who chooses to ignore his own vows, while inviting a wife to ignore hers as well.

The spring of 1993 saw Father Tony further insinuate himself into a “friendship” with Deborah that should have made the rectory bells ring out in alarm. Mike reacted the way most devout Catholic men would when a priest deepens an increasingly ambiguous and ultimately inappropriate relationship with their spouse—by wanting to deny it, then second-guessing himself as denial became impossible, and then becoming frantically insecure about himself and his marriage. Who believes you when you accuse a priest? Often it’s hard even to believe yourself.

Finally in April 1993, after an argument at home in which Mike tried to get Deborah to see how unhealthy her “friendship” with Father Tony was, Mike went to the rectory and confronted Father Tony directly. He told the priest that his presence in Deborah’s life was eroding their marriage. Father Tony was dismissive. He replied with callous calm in his voice, that Deborah had asked him to be her friend for life, and that he already was and would continue to be. Things did change after this ... but only for the worse.

A few months later, in June 1993, Mike found himself in the sort of situation that tears at the fabric of heart, soul, mind, and faith. At Deborah’s insistence, the two of them had invited Father Tony to join them for dinner and a show—90 minutes away. The ride there

was a mess of awkward cordiality, in which, as often as not, Mike felt like he was the one tagging along on an outing between the other two. Dinner was more of the same, but what seared the evening into Mike's memory was the theater. Several times he went to put his arm around Deborah's shoulder—only to find Father Tony's arm already there. The drive home afterwards was excruciating. If there are indeed multiple circles of hell as Dante imagined, Mike explored several of them on the car ride home.

Something shifted after that excursion. It was as though Father Tony's grip on Deborah became more complete once he demonstrated that even Mike's actual presence—to say nothing of the marriage promises made by Mike and Deborah—would deter him from his pursuit of a married woman. Already Deborah had developed a habit of having furtive whispered phone conversations with Father Tony. But over the summer of 1993 this became almost routine. Several times a week, day or night, she would lock herself in the bedroom to have longer and longer conversations with a priest whose words had pledged lifelong friendship to her, while his practice pledged no less than the spiritual destruction of her husband, the unraveling of her marriage, and the alienation of her children from their father. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the promise of lifelong friendship didn't hold up. But the other things? Before he was through, he delivered on all of them—and then some.

Heading into the fall of 1993, a Labor Day weekend at the lake held out faint hope for a fresh start. There was an undeniable frantic tension in the air as the backdrop to Mike and Deborah's best efforts to offer the children a final fun-filled fling before the new school year. Despite the tension, it's hard to put summer, kids, and water in close proximity without some real measure of fun ensuing, and the kids' laughter and antics called out to both of the parents. But for Mike the weekend carried the unbearable weight of his own hopes and anxieties, both for the marriage and for his family. That seemed true for Deborah as well, though it's possible by now that Father Tony had so thoroughly manipulated her wishes that she wasn't even sure whose hopes and anxieties she was carrying any longer.

In any case, they came home late on Labor Day, unloaded five weary children, and worked—no doubt like many a Minnesota family on that night—at getting the kids to make their final school preparations before heading in to bed. And that was the moment Father Tony chose to enter the home, uninvited and without knocking, and to settle in as though this would be the perfect time for a visit. When Mike indicated otherwise, the priest left in a huff, precipitating an argument to end the day, the holiday weekend, and the summer as a whole.

### **Everything Falls Apart**

In September Mike persuaded Deborah to start marriage counseling. Although embittered by Father Tony's continued unwanted, unhelpful, and disruptive presence in the

family, Mike was determined, for love of both Deborah and children, to save the marriage. It would be an uphill battle to a precipitous cliff.

The very month they began marriage counseling Mike came home from a work meeting one night around 10 p.m. and peered into a window of his home to see Father Tony exchange two “very romantic kisses” with Deborah before they realized he had entered the room where they were. Father Tony departed immediately without saying a word, but when Mike confronted Deborah about it, rather than being at all apologetic, she responded aggressively, asserting that she would give up their marriage for her “friendship” with Father Tony if the marriage didn’t change. The next day Mike left the house for nine days at Deborah’s request. It was supposed to give them both space to clear their heads and hearts, but like most of the desperate measures Mike agreed to, it only provided space for more betrayal by a priest.

In November, while looking for a station on the FM radio in his home office, Mike was startled to hear Deborah’s voice coming out of the radio speaker. She was using a wireless handset for their house phone, which at the time used unsecured radio frequencies to communicate with the base unit. Once Mike realized this he began to continue his station search—until suddenly he heard Father Tony’s voice as well. At that point Mike turned on his tape deck to record the conversation. Over the next three days he recorded portions of four conversations between his wife and the man who was his priest. They are damning.

In the first conversation it appears that Father Tony has pulled back a bit from his pursuit of Deborah, perhaps scared by Mike’s interruption of their moment of intimacy several weeks earlier. Deborah laments not knowing how to find “balance,” or what to expect from him any longer. He professes that she remains his “*best* friend.” Between tears, she says the distance between them is so painful it seems like it could kill her. Twice Father Tony calls Deborah, his parishioner and Mike’s wife, “Honey.” He suggests that the two of them could go for a long car ride together and she agrees. It is perhaps a typical pastoral encounter for Father Tony, but there is nothing pastoral about it. This shepherd is not taking care of his sheep.

In the second conversation, one that Mike went to his office to tape when he realized that Deborah had closed herself in the bedroom to talk on the phone, Deborah recounts a recent conversation she had with Father Tony and an unnamed female friend. She “feels heard” by them, understood and supported, although she doesn’t say about what. But she does say, “I just know I can’t anymore ... and I’m also a little scared of knowing that, because I don’t like knowing what I have to do either. I’m not happy with that either.” Given the events later that month, one might surmise she is naming her decision to leave the marriage, but she never says this directly. For his part, for most of the four-minute conversation, Father Tony simply acknowledges her words, “Um-hmm,” again and again. But at one point he interjects, “Well, I love you very much, Deborah.” And she says she loves him, too, and that it felt so good to tell everything (a reference to the earlier conversation) while she was in

Father Tony's arms, while he was being "so cute and gentle" with her. To which he replies, "I'm glad I can be [so cute and gentle]. Because I want to be." The phone call ends with Father Tony telling Deborah, "Call if anything ... happens." After which they both again say to each other, "I love you." By now, Mike's grief has deepened beyond measure. He faces anger toward his wife, but most of all, for this "DNA Catholic," he now stands before an infinite abyss of despair, realizing beyond any possible doubt that his marriage is being undone by a priest.

The third conversation, which Mike stumbled upon just a minute before it ended, seems to concern Deborah's offer to loan or give Father Tony some type of pot or pan to use in his oven. It would be a fairly innocuous priest-parishioner exchange, except that Father Tony makes a point of telling Deborah to come to the back door of rectory—and he calls her, "Hon" ... with a casualness that makes clear it is not the first time he has done so.

The fourth conversation has Deborah reporting on Thanksgiving time with her family, while Father Tony reports on time he spent with his family. It includes talk that seems to refer to plans for Deborah and Father Tony to get together on an evening right after Thanksgiving with some others. This conversation also ends with Father Tony whispering fervently to Deborah, "I love you," and "You're very precious." Whatever Father Tony's relationship to Deborah is by this time, it has long ceased to be either priestly or pastoral. There is an undeniable tone of something akin to romantic passion in his voice, but something, in truth, that is little more than manipulation given the power of his office.

If listening in on this series of phone calls (altogether the taped portions comprise about eighteen minutes) confirmed Mike's worst fears, even the anger he felt did not prepare him for the Saturday night after Thanksgiving. There was no longer any second-guessing of his own perception. This priest that he trusted, representative of a faith that he adored, was playing havoc with his marriage. "Playing" because Mike could not forget the glibness in Tony's voice while he was unraveling the promises Deborah spoke to Mike years earlier; this was something of a *game* to Father Tony: the thrill of adventure, the quest after forbidden intimacy ... and the carnage of collateral damage. Hence, "havoc" as well.

But what Mike now knew to be true, could still be denied by others, and on Saturday night one particularly tenacious set of others—Deborah's parents—did just that. Her parents could be fairly described as *fervent* in their devotion to the Catholic Church, so fervent that their devotion could blind them to everything else. Late that evening, they joined Deborah in what appeared to be an orchestrated "intervention" about Mike's concerns over Deborah's relationship with Father Tony. With his mother-in-law taking the lead, they confront Mike and tell him this is a "beautiful friendship," and that he will just "have to accept it." Mike tries to argue. He offers multiple examples of undeniably inappropriate behavior to show beyond any doubt that this is no "beautiful friendship" but an unhealthy relationship grounded in the transgression of pastoral boundaries. His mother-in-law

explodes in response: “why, you’re Satan!” she exclaims. “You’ll go to hell if you attack priests.”

After more verbal sparring, they give Mike an ultimatum that he must leave his own home within five days to “think things through.” Think about that. Three against one. Deborah’s parents order him to leave his own home, *because he can’t make peace with a priest wooing his wife*. Unable to comprehend a family now arrayed *against him*, Mike decided he needed to leave immediately. It is a choice he will regret later, but in the heat of the moment—overwhelmed with betrayal, hurt, anger, and all of this shredding his faith—it seems like the most principled thing to do.

When it becomes clear that Mike, far from showing any readiness to embrace this priest who wants to share his marriage, is going to leave, Deborah becomes agitated and begs Mike not to go. While he is packing his things up, his father-in-law as well asks him not to leave. And as he heads for the door Deborah is hysterical, reaching out to him, even as her mother holds her back. The night ends with Mike driving several hours to his parents’ home in Duluth, with Deborah in a shambles herself, with her parents (or at least her mother) self-satisfied that they have rid the house of a heretic, and with Father Tony ready to make his next moves.

Two days later, the Monday after Thanksgiving, Mike went directly to the vicar general in the Saint Cloud Diocese to complain about Father Tony’s role in the tensions in his family. To his dismay he was told that Father Tony had already been there, alerting the office to a “delicate situation” and assuring the vicar general that all of his actions have been “pastoral, though apparently not appreciated by the husband.” It was Mike’s first experience of the way the church so often “takes care of its own,” even when their actions harm others.

Throughout the fall Mike and Deborah have gone for marriage counseling at St. Cloud Hospital. They started with one counselor, but as the complexity of the situation became clear, they began to each meet with their own counselor; Mike with a man, and Deborah with a woman. Some sessions were separate and some were together. It wasn’t exactly going well. In large part because the counselors, perhaps for lack of an ability to imagine otherwise, simply accepted Deborah’s assertion that there was nothing inappropriate about her relationship with Father Tony. All of Mike’s concerns were reduced to his own insecurity. It may well be that Mike brought some insecurity into the marriage. It is undoubtedly true that becoming a seemingly helpless bystander while a priest insinuated himself into his own marriage added an exponential amount of insecurity to Mike’s sense of self. Mike later said it would have been easier to deal with Deborah having an affair with a neighbor. That she had an affair with a priest, forced Mike not only to question himself, but to question even the faith he held so dear, the faith that would otherwise have been his anchor. And for the counselors to dismiss all of this as mere “insecurity” for three months was unimaginably hard on Mike.

Finally, in early December, at one of their joint counseling sessions, Mike played the 18-minute audiotape he'd made of the phone conversations. The counselors were dumbfounded. Whatever else was true of the relationship, it was now entirely clear that Father Tony was manipulating Deborah, and that her relationship with this priest could only be described (in *their* words) as "abusive." The counselors told her this, in front of Mike, bluntly and with genuine concern for her wellbeing. Confronted with her own words, with Father Tony's words as well, and with the therapists' compassionate but uncompromising assessment, Deborah fled the room screaming. Out in the hallway she clawed at her face until it bled. Her response revealed the self-destructive energy marshaled to deny the danger that Father Tony posed and the harm that he had already done. The blood she drew was on her face, but it rests ultimately on Father Tony's hands.

Following that dramatic session Deborah refused to participate in any further joint marriage counseling with Mike. There were several periods in which the two of them came close to making conciliatory overtures to one another, but the price of acknowledging the truth about her relationship with Father Tony always proved too high to Deborah. And so, now separated, they began a long slide into alienation and eventual divorce. It was a long rocky road, and the kids—all five of them—were pulled behind, each bump and turn and rock exacting a toll on them. Each of their psyches indelibly marked, not by grace, but by a priest's lack of character and his ongoing abuse of power—and by a church's unwillingness to see and to do anything about it.

### **A Marriage That *Could* Have Been Saved**

Meanwhile, as 1994 arrived, Ben and Cheryl Statz filed for divorce, their marriage fractured beyond repair by Father Tony's advances on Cheryl in 1992 and by Ben's inability to accompany her through a healing process. Over the next two years Cheryl's bouts with depression would lead to several hospitalizations, and in 1997 their divorce became final. But Father Tony was not around for any of this. He was busily inserting himself into the faltering marriage of Deborah and Mike—and into the lives of their children.

With Mike no longer living in his own home, Father Tony became a fixture there. He assumed Mike's place at the children's birthday parties, he figuratively showered them with gifts—and literally bathed them in the bathtub. He tried to present himself as disciplinarian in the home (once even threatening to break one of the boys' fingers when he was being obstinate) and regularly displayed affection for Deborah in front of the children. All the sorts of things that your typical Catholic priest does—*NOT*. (In fact, Mike learned much later from his adult children that Father Tony even slept over at their homes on numerous occasions during this time.)

Beginning just a few days after Mike left the family home in November 1993 and through much of 1994 Mike and Deborah communicated through letters, phone calls, voice

messages, and occasional face-to-face meetings. Frequently. There were periods of relative silence, but also multiple flurries of impassioned exchanges. Reviewing a sampling of their correspondence and messages reveals a couple that is cycling through a wide range of emotions: damning, then forgiving, despair-ridden, then hopeful; bitter, then begging. Neither comes across as a saint; neither is purely a villain. They are a couple wracked by pain, confusion, alienation, dashed dreams, and faint glimmers of hope. For the entire year, amid all the tension, anguish, and hurt, both of them repeatedly profess their love to the other.

Besides the correspondence, Deborah peppered Mike with phone calls—a couple dozen in the middle of the night. And she “stalked” him on the St. John’s campus where he worked and at his apartment. This wasn’t done so much in a threatening manner, but in an agitated state. Her mood alternated between accusatory and pleading. She wanted all the messiness to be gone, but beyond that she could never decide whether she wanted Mike in her life or out of it—although all the while her desperate ambiguity was sustained by a priest who refused to leave.

Deborah and Mike never managed to reconcile. For every profession of love there was a moment of mistrust, an allegation made, a hurt compounded. But what is painfully clear, given all the history yet to unfold, is that this was a marriage that *could* have been healed and made whole. The failings displayed by both Mike and Deborah were certainly real—and human. But so was their longing for redemption and reconciliation. Had they had the pastoral care of a priest committed to offering them both companionship as they battled their own insecurities and worked on forgiving the hurts caused by the other it seems quite possible that they could have reconciled and found their way to a fulfilling marriage. Instead—and altogether unasked for—they found themselves in the company of a priest determined to marginalize one of them and to manipulate the other.

### **A Litany of Abuse**

While Mike rode a rollercoaster of emotions regarding the marriage and his relationship with Deborah, he had absolute clarity on one thing: Father Tony needed to be held accountable by the Church for the damage done—and still being done—to his family. He felt deeply betrayed by a particular priest and his personal faith had been shaken—how does one “see God at work” in a situation like this? But he maintained a measure of confidence that the Diocese, once aware of Father Tony’s transgressions, would take action to restore the pastoral office and to help Mike’s marriage and family.

Thus, in the spring of 1994, now living on his own, Mike compiled his concerns (an understatement if ever there was one!) into a document that he presented to the St. Cloud Diocese. His hope was two-fold: to send an alarm about the predatory practices of a priest in

the diocese and to seek aid for healing in his marriage and family. His hopes were dashed on both counts.

Among the things Mike laid out in his document:

- That the “friendship” between Father Tony and Deborah had caused growing alienation in their marriage—and that Deborah’s insistence that any future for the marriage must include acceptance of this “friendship” had prevented any viable reconciliation between them.
- That financial losses from separate households, legal fees, marriage counseling were mounting.
- That he felt “kept off balance” by Father Tony, who gave the couple assorted books on marriage, even claimed that their marriage “is a blessing to my priesthood”—and said that he prayed for Deborah and Mike’s marriage while raising the host during the Eucharistic prayer—but refused to ever address the inappropriateness or the impact of his own interactions with Deborah.
- That he had become distanced from his own children as a result of Father Tony’s ongoing actions. Obviously, by being asked to move out of his own home because of marital difficulties, but also in more troubling ways as the children themselves were often confused and troubled by Father Tony’s actions. He reported that his children had made comments like: “Father Tony comes over and gives us hugs and kisses.” And they posed questions to him like: “Why does mom kiss Father Tony like a daddy?” and “Why does mommy treat Father Tony more like a daddy than you?” Besides the distress evident in their immediate questions, Mike worried about its impact on their future perceptions of clergy and on their own future relationships in adulthood.
- That Father Tony engaged in a whole range of activities wholly inappropriate to a priest: from giving Deborah roses to making physical displays of affection; from stopping by their home without notice (and sometimes after dark) copious phone calls; from saying he loved Deborah in a romantic tone to adopting “honey” as a pet name for her. That Father Tony frequently went out with Deborah and her niece late at night while Mike stayed home with the children, a practice which, he wrote, so blurred relationship lines that it “added to my children’s confusion over the composition of the family.”

It is a document that ought to have sounded multiple alarms within the Saint Cloud Diocese. Instead it touched off a series of evasive maneuvers by diocesan officials. The Diocese agreed to provide for the costs of marriage counseling, although stating explicitly this was being done “purely as a matter of pastoral concern [and] is not in any way to be considered an acknowledgement of guilt on our part or on the part of Father Tony.” Despite Mike’s itemized litany of detailed examples and concrete concerns, the relationship between

Father Tony and Deborah was deemed by the Diocese to be simply a “consenting adult relationship.” A year later, in 1995 as divorce approached, Mike worked to secure counseling for his children through diocesan resources. Unfortunately, as he discovered, the Diocese’ “Changing Family Program,” which claimed to help children cope with the immediate stresses posed by parental divorce ... had a *one-year* waiting list. Before they ever got near to the front of the list Deborah moved with the children outside the Diocese, and the mileage, as well as the emotional distance, between Mike and his children increased.

### **A Church Unwilling and Unwilling and Unwilling to See**

At this juncture in the story two threads need to be spun separately although they interweave chronologically: Mike’s ongoing efforts to get the Church to see what was happening and his ongoing efforts, post-divorce, to remain a presence in the lives of his children. But first, a pair of new marriages occurred.

Somehow Deborah managed to have her marriage to Mike annulled. Although Mike called the Diocese and demanded to meet in person for the annulment interview, he was never granted a face-to-face meeting as was his right, nor was he ever billed for the annulment (as is typical). It was as though someone behind the scenes was orchestrating things to happen as quickly and with as little resistance as possible. Then, in August of 1997 Deborah got remarried to Peter—who happened to be Father Tony’s best friend. It was a relationship that Father Tony instigated (perhaps for his own protection?); in fact, Father Tony, after being the catalyst to end Deborah’s first marriage, had the audacity to celebrate the wedding Mass at her second marriage.

The following December (1998) Mike got remarried as well, to Kris. She became a fierce ally and companion in the years ahead. Kris herself would say that Mike’s marriage to Deborah could have—and should have—been saved. But failing that, it is true as well that Mike’s capacity to persevere over the next sixteen years—in his faith, his fight for justice, and his care for his children—is a testament to the strength he found in Kris.

The same month that Mike married Kris, his oldest son, then 17, had a confrontation with Deborah, her new husband, Peter—and Father Tony, who continued to be a regular (that is, *irregular*) presence in Deborah’s home. It was perhaps nothing more than adolescent behavior challenges, but it left Mike distraught. Mike had joint-custody, yet the priest who broke up his marriage continued to play back-up parent to Mike’s son rather than support Mike as the father whose presence should have been central in addressing a situation of escalating conflict. Within the year, Deborah and Peter kicked this oldest son out of the house because he hadn’t paid them rent (he’s still in high school at the time!), and he ended up moving in with Mike and Kris.

During the same time period, now the fall of 1999, as Mike heard more from this son of Father’s Tony ongoing influence in Deborah’s home, he again contacted the Saint Cloud

Diocese with his concerns. Note that Deborah had now been *remarried for two years to Peter*, but Father Tony continued to play a defining role in the family.

In November 1999 Mike was granted a meeting with the Vicar General of the diocese. A former canon lawyer and a Minnesota appellate judge were also there. In their presence, the Vicar General acknowledged that Father's Tony behavior was unacceptable. He even revealed that back in 1994 Father Tony was "taken for evaluation" and ordered to stay away from Deborah and the children—an order that Father Tony apparently respected about as much as his own vows. Which is to say, pretty much not at all.

The following month, December 1999, the Diocese arranged for a meeting at which Mike, accompanied by an advocate of his choosing, was able to present his complaint directly to Father Tony, who was present at the meeting accompanied likewise by an advocate of his choice. Speaking from the same notes used to outline his concern to the Diocese, Mike used a full 90 minutes to lay out directly to Father Tony the harms that Mike, Deborah, and the children had experienced through him. Father Tony denied nothing. The sole words he spoke in his defense were to declare that Mike's children were precious to him. The Diocesan official present agreed with Mike that Father Tony's behavior, particularly with Deborah, constituted "boundary violations," because, as he put later in writing, such "frequent, familiar relationships are out of bounds for a person committed to celibacy." For a brief moment Mike felt heard. But the moment passed.

In the following months Mike persisted in approaching the Diocese for funds to cover counseling for his children. This request was made in line with a diocesan policy to provide funds for counseling to those who allege inappropriate conduct by church personnel. In addition to his earlier charges about Father Tony, Mike alleged that Father Tony, as well as Deborah and Peter, were acting to alienate the children from him. In March 2000 the diocesan official responded in a letter which goes to great lengths to clarify that the prior fall, when he acknowledged "boundary violations," these were merely "professional" transgressions and, from this official's perspective, while Father Tony actions were "inappropriate," they did not constitute criminal or even immoral conduct.

This last statement seems baldly inaccurate, given that Deborah was a parishioner of Father Tony's, someone who turned to him for spiritual counsel. Minnesota Statute 148A, addressing sexual exploitation by psychotherapists, specifically *criminalizes* such boundary violations when they occur in a relationship with someone to whom you are providing counseling—and expressly names "member of the clergy" among those to whom the statute applies. Such statutes are intended to protect patients (and parishioners), whose emotional vulnerability in relationship to their therapist or clergy person eclipses any meaningful exercise of consent. Nevertheless, the diocesan official uses Deborah's untenable defense of the (boundary-violating!) relationship with Father Tony as grounds to dismiss Mike's concerns about that relationship. As such, the Diocese itself loaded onto Deborah's conscience the entire burden of Father Tony's inappropriate (*and criminal*) behavior.

Required over the years to reiterate to herself and others—and against the clear wisdom of the Statute—that “it didn’t happen,” she was forced to bear the weight of a whole series of lies told by others.

In response to Mike’s claim that Father Tony continues to be an unwelcome presence in the home and that the children are being alienated against him, the official simply relies on Deborah’s, Peter’s and Father Tony’s own words to dismiss Mike’s claim. Ultimately he rejects Mike’s request for financial assistance to seek counseling for the children because Deborah, as joint custody parent, would strongly object to such counseling. After reiterating that nothing in the diocesan response should be taken to “imply an admission of criminal or immoral activity,” the letter concludes by urging Mike “to get a grip on this whole affair” (sadly, no pun intended) because “it is eating away at your life.”

The letter left Mike feeling once again helpless. The Church—or the Saint Cloud Diocese, at least—seemed determined to remain blind to any damage done, any threat posed by Father Tony.

In December 2000 a new document appeared, something that is virtually a “smoking gun.” During a weekend visitation, one of Mike’s sons brings him a letter he found in his other home (Deborah’s). The child was hurt and angry and asked, “Is this why you and mom broke up?” The letter was written by Father Tony to Deborah four years earlier (December 1996). It dates from a time two years after the Diocese claims it ordered Father Tony to stay away from Deborah and eight months prior to her marriage to Peter, but while the two were dating. Mike ultimately made a photocopy of the letter and told his son to put it back where he found it

In the letter, which runs three pages, Father Tony states his love for Deborah repeatedly and unmistakably: “I love you like I have never loved anyone before.” He acknowledges his jealousy of Peter, “that you are giving to Peter what I think belongs to me.” He says he feels cheated, “you gave yourself to me and now can give yourself to someone else. And he admits that “I gave myself to someone I had no right to and who was not in a place to give herself to me.” However, he never mentions Mike and voices no remorse for having “taken” from Mike (and Deborah!) something that was never his to take. Father Tony is careful throughout the letter to speak indirectly. There is no explicit mention of a sexual relationship, though the repeated comparison to Deborah’s relationship with Peter makes it clear that the love referred to *is* romantic/sexual love.

The letter is framed by a self-revealing analysis of psychological needs rooted in Father’s Tony’s childhood. He credits Deborah with making him feel loved for the first real time, which he then says allowed him to hear more clearly the voice of God calling him (back) to his priestly vocation, which is why he can no longer love Deborah as much he might wish to, because only by being true to his priestly calling can he find fulfillment. He asks for space, so that he can put their relationship into the place it properly belongs (pretty clearly acknowledging that it was out of place before this)—although he ends the by rather begging

for continued contact even in the midst of his need for space. Father Tony's self-understanding is ultimately between himself, his therapist or spiritual director, and God. But its relevance here is that whatever deep need he carried from childhood into the priesthood would appear to be the same need that drove him to reach out first to Cheryl, then to Deborah, and later on to at least two other women and likely more.

The following year, 2001, Mike reconnects with Cheryl. After learning from Mike all that has transpired for him and Deborah, Cheryl decides her story needs to be told. She crafts a statement detailing her experience with Father Tony. Armed now with Cheryl's statement and the photocopied letter from Father Tony to Deborah, Mike bundles up his prior documentation, adds in the new items, and sends it off to the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese.

In December, 2001, Mike and Cheryl, accompanied by their advocates, meet with a representative of the Archdiocese. It does not go well. The representative listens politely but suggests that Cheryl and Mike are imagining things out of context and over-reacting to minor indiscretions. When Mike lifts up the recently-found letter as "proof" of *major* indiscretion, the official retorts, "That? That's just stupid." Once again, there is no action.

Mike begins to believe that Father Tony has something akin to diplomatic immunity. It's as though there is an unspoken but widely known directive that "this one gets a free pass—no matter what." For the next several years he is at a loss for what to do. No matter the rightness of your cause, when an entire institution with almost limitless resources chooses to dismiss your pain and ignore your calls for justice it can leave almost anyone feeling like a voice crying in the wilderness. Plus, Mike had a new marriage, the lives of his own children as well as step-children, job changes, and health issues. His plate was more than full.

In 2005, while Mike and Kris watched together the inner turmoil that continued to shape the lives of Mike's children as they navigated adolescence and young adulthood, they decided to renew their efforts to hold Father Tony accountable. Feeling that they had exhausted avenues of appeal within church structures, they posted Mike's story on the SNAP website (Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests) hoping to alert others to Father Tony's behavior—and possibly to encourage others with similar experiences to come forward.

In 2006 Mike is dismayed to see publicity for an upcoming talk in the Saint Cloud Diocese that promises to "increase understanding of God's gift of human sexuality in marriage"—presented by Father Tony! He fires off an angry letter to the Diocese, reminding them that he fully documented for them a decade ago reasons why Father Tony is the last person who is credible—or trustworthy—to present on such a theme. Eventually, after the event itself, Mike received a terse letter from Bishop Kinney of the Saint Cloud Diocese acknowledging his objections. In five sentences, the bishop says he reviewed the file relating to Mike's past concerns and found notes that "seem to indicate that a true resolution to the issues was never achieved." He relates that he inquired of Father Tony whether a meeting

with Mike might prove beneficial, but adds, “Father Oelrich indicated that meetings with you in the past were without success.” And once again the Church chooses to keep its eyes squeezed tightly shut, lest it be required to see what has been done.

In 2007 Bishop Kinney named Father Tony as Rector of the Cathedral Church of St. Mary in St. Cloud, Minnesota, seeming to confirm Mike’s earlier perception that Father Tony has something like a “Midas touch” in his career. Although, as anyone familiar with the tale of King Midas knows, that golden touch proves to be disastrous for all who are touched by the King. Also in 2007, in response to an update on their 2005 SNAP post, Mike and Kris are contacted by Peggy Warren, herself a victim of a predator priest and founder of Educating to End Abuse. She invites Mike to tell his story on her website, listing Father Tony as an abuser there as well.

Two years later, in the summer of 2009, a couple from the Saint Cloud area peruse the Educating to End Abuse website and see the information posted there about Father Tony. More than simply surprised to see a local priest listed there, they are *alarmed* by what they see since they are members of the parish where Father Tony was serving at the time. In fact, one of them is on the church council. They reach out to Peggy Warren, who puts them in touch with Mike and Kris. That fall (2009) this couple meets with Mike and Kris and find themselves deeply troubled at the thought of someone like Father Tony acting as a spiritual leader in their parish. But they are unsure how to proceed.

Early in 2010 this couple asks Mike for permission to begin sharing what they have learned with others in the parish. Mike gives qualified permission. Although he is plenty angry, Mike doesn’t want the situation to spin out of control. Eager for justice, he has no interest in mob justice. Ultimately, at the couple’s suggestion, Mike and Kris decide to meet first with Tom Klecker, someone who attended a Bible Study with the couple. A forensic psychologist in the Saint Cloud area, Klecker is also trained to serve as an “advocate” for persons in official proceedings within the Diocese.

After Klecker hears their story he offers to help make their case to the Diocese again by putting together a position paper backed up by his professional credentials. His concern is genuine and he even makes arrangements to meet with Cheryl Statz to hear her story as well. Afterwards Klecker encourages Mike and Kris to meet with Roxann Storms, the Victims Advocate at the Saint Cloud Diocese. Jaded by past experiences with the Diocese they are understandably reluctant but agree to do so in order to cover every base.

Almost immediately things go awry. When they meet with Storms they learn that—despite Klecker’s assurance that he would not inform the Diocese without their consent—she is already fully aware of their meetings with Klecker and has even already briefed the bishop on them. Klecker meanwhile encourages Mike and Kris to approach Mike’s children and see whether any of them would meet with him to share what they witnessed between Deborah and Father Tony.

The timing is terrible. Mike's relationships with his children have been precarious ever since Father Tony insinuated himself into the family seventeen years earlier. His oldest son is due to be married in a few days. He and Kris agree to author a letter asking Mike's children to consider sharing their recollections of the early years of Father Tony's presence in their home. They are at pains in the letter to be clear this is "not about mom, but about a predatory priest." They share the letter with the Victims Advocate, but emphasize that they won't mail them until several days after the wedding celebration because they don't want this action to intrude upon the wedding.

Meanwhile, Klecker reaches out to Ben Statz, Cheryl's ex-husband to hear his side of their experience. Klecker does this the week *before* the wedding, explaining to Ben that he is assisting with an investigation by the Victim's Advocacy program. Since Ben had continued to be in contact with Deborah (recall that she testified on Ben's behalf and against Cheryl in their divorce trial), it's likely that he notified Deborah rather quickly of Klecker's contact. Whatever the actual chain of events, in early July Mike's eldest son, newly married, calls Mike in anger and accuses him of trying to make more trouble for Deborah. He breaks off all contact with Mike at this point. The other children likewise decline to meet with Klecker. This is hardly a defense of Father Tony. It is more an instinctively felt need to "protect" Deborah and a general weariness of the drama. None of the children, now ranging from 21-29 years old, are able to see Mike's request as anything more than an attempt at revenge. Although vaguely aware of other "concerns" about Father Tony, they do not comprehend the gravity of them—or the consequence such concerns carry in the lives of others.

By the end of 2010 Klecker informs Mike and Kris that because there is "no pattern present" and no testimony from the children, and because the events Mike described are now more than a decade old, he does not believe he can do anything more for them. It becomes one more instance in which Mike took a significant emotional and spiritual risk, hoping to protect the integrity of the pastoral office, the image of the church, and the faith of so many whose lives have crossed Father Tony's—only to discover yet again that, in the eyes of the institution, there is often more interest in protecting the façade of faithfulness in one priest than in pursuing the truth and protecting the families and faith of many others. He is, again, crestfallen.

Almost exactly a year later, December 21, 2011, Kris receives a phone call from a woman in tears. She had been searching online for assistance regarding her own struggle to put her life back together after a relationship with a predatory priest. Finding her way to the SNAP website she'd read Kris's post about Father Tony—she is in tears *because the predatory priest in her case was also Father Tony Oelrich*. She states that she had a sexual relationship with him in 2009 and that, while she does not have any letters or emails as evidence, her phone records will show a period of time during which Father Tony made 15-20 calls to her *per day*. She is in deep spiritual crisis and in the midst of some significant life transitions. It is clear that she feels extraordinarily vulnerable simply to have acknowledged what happened to her. She calls Kris three times in two days right before Christmas, and Kris calls her back once after

Christmas. She says she needs some time to focus on the transitions she's in the midst of before going more public with her claim. Unfortunately, she never contacts Kris again. Her tears and her tentativeness bear witness to the toxic power that priestly authority and sexual shame have to silence those whose voices bear truths too painful to speak.

In 2014 Father Tony was sent away “on retreat” for rest and renewal. It's possible that “retreat” means “treatment,” if his pattern of abuses had begun to chase after him. In any case, after several months away from parish work, heading into the summer of 2015 and approaching the one-year anniversary of Mike's death, Kris learned that Father Tony was returning to Saint Cloud to resume ministry as a priest to college students at the Newman Center. About the same time she was contacted by Cara (not her real name), a woman who served on staff alongside Father Tony for six years as Faith Formation Director at the Cathedral Church of St. Mary. She related that Father Tony “went after” her, but that she rebuffed him. Nonetheless, Cara reported that he went on to make her life hell, as though to make her pay for thinking it was her place to refuse his advances. She explained that her situation was all the more complicated because both she and her husband had staff positions in the parish, so going public with her experience would almost certainly fracture the parish and likely cost both of them their livelihood.

Clearly, Father Tony engaged in a pattern of predatory pastoral care that—*on multiple occasions*—betrayed trust placed in him as a priest for relationships that were manipulated to meet his own needs. And just as clearly the church has shown no real interest in holding him accountable for his actions. As a result the “legacy” of his days as a priest will be marked ultimately by the lives of faith he betrayed, by the women he abused, and by the marriages and families that were ripped apart by his predatory behavior.

### **Holy Innocents**

Stronger even than his desire to see justice done, for the past twenty-plus years Mike's driving force has been his love for his children and his attempt to remain an active and involved father in their lives. This has rarely been easy and still more rarely successful.

At the time that his marriage was torn apart by a priest, Mike's five children ranged in age from four to twelve. Each was no doubt overwhelmed by the way their family unexpectedly imploded over a holiday weekend. None of them had the inner resources to assess things critically—they were kids, for God's sake. And while Deborah may have been intentionally vindictive or simply scared and confused when she painted everything as Mike's fault, the undeniable over-riding truth is that Father Tony bears primary responsibility for his role in this. He had earlier taken vows of ministry whereby he pledged to uphold and support marriages like Mike and Deborah's—even and especially as they faced challenges. Instead he used the prestige and allure of his vows precisely to undermine those spoken by Mike and Deborah more than a decade earlier.

“Dad, Dad, it looks like we don’t have to go after all!” “Go where?” Mike asked. The voice belonged to his middle son, and the words tumbled out in a tone of relief that Mike was supposed to understand. He didn’t. Mike was meeting the kids at the Great Hall on the St. John’s University campus shortly before Christmas 1993. It was the first time he had seen them since leaving the home right after Thanksgiving. “Go where?” Mike repeated. And his six-year-old son answered, “Mom says because of all the stuff you’ve been doing we might have to go to a foster home.” (That “stuff” included Mike’s attempts to sound an alarm about Father Tony’s actions.)

It was the first of a series of supervised visitations that Mike was limited to. Characterized by Deborah as angry and unstable (because he couldn’t quietly and cheerfully reconcile her intimate relationship with a priest—imagine that!), Mike was initially allowed to see his children only with his own father along. Although his dad was understanding and supportive, it was extremely humiliating for Mike.

Thus, almost from the moment their family was fractured Mike was portrayed to the children as “the problem.” It’s safe to say that not every choice Mike made, nor every word he spoke—either as spouse or parent—would be deemed ‘wise’ or even ‘ideal.’ Indeed, *every* spouse and every parent, if they are honest, can make a long list of decisions they would make differently if they could, words they’d recall and recast if possible. And Mike had his list. The truth is, given the ebb and flow of alienation he faced with his children over the years, he had too much time to reflect on that list. And the tragedy is, given his unexpected and untimely death in 2014, neither he nor his children had the time they needed to move from reflection to reconciliation.

Mike was neither better nor worse than most parents are—if anything, amid his imperfections, his long-suffering perseverance over years of unresolved anguish would humble many of us. But he was human. And that bears mentioning precisely because *it doesn’t matter*. There is absolutely no room for a “Yes, but—” in response to his anguish. Bottom line: *he did not deserve to have a priest unravel the fabric of his family*. No one deserves that.

And no one *expects* it. Which is why from extended family to spouses to the children—holy innocents caught in the middle—no one knew exactly how to react.

Deborah’s parents seemed so devoted to their Catholicism that they simply could not imagine a priest doing anything wrong. How could his close involvement in their daughter’s life be anything other than a blessing? And how dare their son-in-law construe it as a threat? Whatever messages they explicitly gave to their grandchildren, their absolute denial of any impropriety by Father Tony and their vocal judgment of Mike implicitly told their grandchildren, “whatever is going on, it must be your dad’s fault.”

Deborah herself seemed to react with inner chaos. It appears that, at least initially, she simply wanted *everything*, on her terms, with no conflict. If Mike could only accept the

presence of a third person in their marriage, she was ready to follow Father Tony down a path he (and she) had no business even being on.

Deborah bears some small measure of responsibility for choices she made; she was, after all, an adult. But we like to forget the way that power dynamics misshape human choices, perhaps because such an awareness reminds us of how vulnerable each one of us might be in the right (or wrong) situation. She was mightily confused by the attention Father Tony showered on her and by her own feelings in response. At one point she even exclaimed to Mike, “It’s *your* fault; you practically drove me into his arms.” For a year after the Thanksgiving weekend when everything exploded she struggled to figure out whether she wanted to, and whether she could, reconcile with Mike. Through it all she must have battled feelings of guilt and denial, finding herself at least semi-aware that Mike’s allegations about Father Tony were true—but that was a truth that proved too costly for her ever to fully acknowledge.

As a result of her own intense inner confusion, Deborah inevitably used the children both as a way to protect herself and as a way to exercise control over Mike. If the kids believed that Dad was the problem, it was that much easier for Deborah to believe the same. And if she could use the kids—both their attitudes and access to them—to keep Mike off balance, it made it easier for her to exist with her own off-balance feelings.

But children have a need for certainty that eclipses whatever ambiguity their mom felt and whatever anguish their dad experienced. Having primary placement with their mother they had little choice but to adapt whatever feelings they had to the circumstances in which they found themselves, which meant primarily internalizing Mom’s worldview. Not because they “decided” it was right, but because it sorted out the rampant chaos in their world in the way that was safest and most secure. It meant finding a place for Father Tony in their world whether he belonged or not. And, because the inertia of their lived experience occurred on Mom’s turf—where Father Tony acted as “father” to these children in a most un-Fatherly way—it led the kids to unintentionally but inescapably marginalize Dad’s perspective. Not so much as a choice, but as a necessity of life experienced in different ways across the development span of their years.

For Mike it was sheer hell. Out of respect for the children’s privacy the majority of this section’s narrative will remain intentionally general. I titled this section “holy innocents” because whatever wounding they have done along the way has been the result of far deeper wounds inflicted on them while they were entirely innocent, although that does not mean that their actions did not create further wounds for Mike.

All of the children, to one degree or another, experienced Mike’s anger at Father Tony’s behavior as attacks on their Mom. They may not have been able to imagine being so critical of a priest no matter what, but their instinctive response was to protect Mom against *any* criticism, and they perceived Mike’s judgment of Father Tony as criticism of their mom. It’s

developmentally understandable. But it created a no-win scenario for Mike: criticism or silence, each choice seemed to be a path paved with distance and alienation.

He learned from his children later that whenever they spoke of missing him—which they regularly did early on—Deborah immediately suppressed their feelings with her own words of disapproval or by piling further blame on Mike. At one point, one of the boys, in response to being criticized for his own shortcomings, retorted to Deborah, “Don’t preach to me, you’re the one who had an affair with a priest.” But the real charge deserved to be leveled against Father Tony. Had the church dealt with his transgressions when first alerted to them, Mike, Deborah, and the kids would have had a much better shot at navigating their turmoil to a healthier resolution. But that was never forthcoming.

Mike lived through weekends of rough transitions into and out of his home as the kids’ anxiety seeped through. He wrestled with questions and judgments that no parent should need to address—knowing all the while that no matter how well he addressed them, in just forty-eight hours the kids would be gone again, whisked off to their mother’s home where a very different reality held sway. On his weekends, he regularly took the children to Mass because, despite the pain he was in because of a priest, he continued to believe that the church as a whole was life-giving. Today, however, most of the children have little or no use for church in their lives; turns out the church gave them precious little to believe in.

Over the years there was no lack of drama. When parents are at odds, their kids often and unwittingly ramp up the conflict. At times to serve their own needs, more often to please or placate one parent or to work out anxiety they’re not even consciously aware of. Mike’s kids “acted out” in a variety of ways. There were behavior issues, both at home and at school, including instances of (relatively minor) drug use. Self-harm and health issues that had roots in internalized anxiety and anger manifested themselves. At one point allegations of abuse were leveled against Mike, resulting in an order for protection being placed on him. The allegations were later disproven, but the wounds were deep and long-lasting.

As the kids grew, Mike dealt with the tenuousness of trying to be a parent willing to set the necessary limits that guide a child into adulthood all the while knowing that, having been pushed to the edge of their lives for so long, his authority itself felt limited. Right up through the first of his own children’s marriages, Deborah and her family continued to exert an alienating force into Mike’s relationship with his kids. He had a unique journey with each of his five children, but none can be said to have gone especially well.

As one of them lamented from their mid-twenties, “We kids went through a lot, and you went through a lot and were hurt by us kids as well, Dad. But we were KIDS and we were having our parents, our family, our whole life torn apart. How are we supposed to know how to deal—we were kids. How are we supposed to deal with what we saw and what happened and how we were treated and NOT have it all come out backwards in how we try to pick up the pieces of our lives and protect ourselves. We just wanted parents. We just wanted to be loved. That’s it. None of this other B.S.”

The pain is almost palpable. The desperate wishing that life had dealt a different hand. The keen awareness that—as *kids*—they were never *meant* to know how to deal with this level of tumult. And the bitter insight that, more likely than not, it would “come out backwards” as they each tried to pick up the pieces and move forward in life.

True enough, each child—now having reached adulthood—has had their own saga of relationship difficulties. For years they were immersed in their mother’s unhealthy relationship with a priest and her subsequent marriage in which somehow Father Tony continued to have a presence in their family. This was compounded by equal years of strained, conflicted relationships with their dad—often opening up into gaping chasms of silence. Growing up in this quagmire of relational turmoil, dysfunctional and emotionally dishonest ways of relating to others became normalized for them. Each has longed for authentic intimacy; each struggles to find it. It is as though their lives are indelibly shaped by unseen “dark matter,” and they have spent an extraordinary amount of energy reacting to its presence. The pain that marks their lives still today has many roots, but foremost among those roots is a man who still wears a collar and still pretends to teach about the sanctity of marriage and family. There is always hope—although it is now too late for that hope to be actualized between Mike and his children. But hope nonetheless. Still, there is also untold wreckage left in the wake of Father Tony’s ministry, and among these “holy innocents,” that wreckage calls out for justice.

### **Onamia: The Final Chapter**

At the end of 2006 Mike and Kris moved to Onamia, the town where he had attended prep school some three decades earlier. It was a healing place for Mike to be. By then the toll of so many years of stress, anguish, and bitter disappointment were noticeable. His energy had slowed. His humor—ever a bright spot—had grown weary. His faith was subdued. And his health had become challenging. It is fair to say that decades of wrestling alternately with church and children were killing him. But he didn’t know that quite yet.

Still, living in the shadow of the school and church that had sown faith for him long ago he caught a bit of a second wind. His faith found its bearings and a measure of peace eventually took root. It was from that place of modest peace—still facing injustice from the church and alienation from his children—that Mike reached out to me through Kris sometime in 2013.

By now he had exhausted all hope that the church would ever willingly hold Father Tony accountable for the damage done to both faith and families in the wake of his “ministry.” And he was wearied by repeated attempts—and repeated failures—to make fresh starts with his children. Mike began to ask himself quite pointedly, “How can these, my own children, whom I love so dearly—how can they not see the truth of who I am sufficiently to simply love me back?” It was a painful question to pose, and one that could only be posed in the

relative calm of Onamia, but it was also a question that increasingly haunted him. He began to wonder whether his voice could ever reach through to his children, the lines of communication by now sown with countless emotional landmines in both directions.

So Mike asked me if I would help record his story. His hope was two-fold. He hoped that presented in this way his story might rouse the faithful to call upon their leaders in the church to finally address the betrayal of ministry by Father Tony, a betrayal that appears to continue to the present day. So justice. But he also hoped that, carried by a voice less anguished and less anxious than his own, perhaps in this telling his own children—today, next year, or in the autumn of their lives—might hear at last the truth of a man who, for all his flaws, loved them with all his heart. So, also mercy and love.

In the spring of 2014 Mike and I arranged a first meeting. He took me on a tour of the now defunct Crosier Prep School and the Holy Cross Center. He recalled the days of his youth with impish joy and walked through the sanctuary with quiet reverence. Kris told me later how much it moved her to see his spirits lift as we strolled the grounds together. Afterwards, over lunch and long into the afternoon, he poured out his story to me. I scribbled notes—pages upon pages—trying to keep pace with his words and to track the often-shifting direction of his memories. Then I set about writing.

There were details to clarify, lots of material to organize and a whole ton of heartache to write my way through. I prepared a preliminary draft of the first several pages to show Mike what I imagined doing. We traded several emails tweaking this or that. Overall he was pleased. Very pleased. Kris said he was positively buoyant, feeling heard and hearing his voice echoing in my writing. And then he was dead. Just like that.

In May 2014 Mike's health took a series of downturns on multiple fronts. By early June he was in almost nonstop significant pain and not able to concentrate on much of anything. His energy came and went without warning. Our project, only recently begun, was put on hold.

In mid-June they discovered cancer—metastasized. His prognosis was worse than bleak. One week later he was dead. And this is the final chapter in Mike's anguish. As he spent the last weeks worried, asking the inevitable "what if?" questions with Kris, he was not ready to tell his children about the impending crisis. Even when he was hospitalized he did not want them to know. Not out of any bitterness, but out of fear. *Mike feared that even if his children learned he was dying they wouldn't come to see him—and he could not bear the thought of knowing they knew and had chosen to stay away.*

One of the final graces a Catholic might request is extreme unction—the anointing of the sick at the edge of death. In Mike's case the presence of his children might have been an even greater grace, a sign of healing even more needful to his peace. But because of the reverberating treachery of Father Tony more than two decades earlier which created wounds that had never been allowed to heal, now on his deathbed Mike hesitated to ask even for the grace of his own children.

His fear was partially justified. In the hospital Mike was put on a ventilator and into a medically induced coma for two days while they worked to stabilize him. When he woke from the coma, his sister, Michelle, was there with Kris. Together the three of them decided, with the end looming so large, to reach out to the children. Three came; two stayed away. One of the kids who came brought along his son—it was the first time Mike met this grandson. Sadly, he died shortly after, having never met four other grandchildren because of the lasting alienation. For those who came to the hospital there was a measure of healing—but not nearly enough time for it to be complete. Still, there was at least both laughter and tears, both grief and grace in the final hours.

Both of the children who stayed away from the hospital also stayed away from the funeral. Among the three who came, none was prepared to share any remembrance of Mike during the service. Those words were offered by one of Mike’s stepsons. He paid tribute to Mike’s humor, hard work, and unconditional love. A strange irony that the parting witness offered about Mike as a father came from a son he received from the Lutheran pastor he had been remarried to, rather than any of the children of his own blood whose relationships with him were forever twisted by a Catholic priest.

Mike Johnson died on June 24, 2014 at the age of 53. His body exhausted, his heart wearied as well, but his hope remained fierce even as his body grew weak. The result, no doubt, of a life—amid its own imperfections—rooted finally in truth and grace. On his deathbed he asked Kris to see that this project came to completion, and she promised that it would. There is nothing “fitting” about his death, except perhaps this: he died on the feast day of John the Baptist, that voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight a pathway for righteousness.” His funeral Mass was held at Holy Cross Catholic Church, right next to the shrine for Saint Odilia. Like that voice in the wilderness, Mike’s parting prayer no doubt joined his hope to that of Saint Odilia herself: restore the clarity of our vision and truth even now—for all of us! Amen.

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