

# What Father Bradel Did to Me

The power of seeing one priest's name on a list.

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St. Paul Cathedral, the mother church of the Pittsburgh Diocese, which was one of the six Pennsylvania dioceses included in the state attorney general's report. Jeff Swensen/Getty Images

When I saw the name of the priest who molested me listed in the Pennsylvania grand jury's report, I thought: I'm gonna be in big trouble. The abuse started when I was about 12 years old, so it's not a surprise that the

language that came to mind was straight out of that period of my life.

I scanned through the nearly [900 pages of the report](#) that was released by the attorney general last week. It detailed abuse in six dioceses over 70 years, listing more than 300 abusive priests. The accounts were horrifying — young victims were given gold cross necklaces to signal to other predators that they were ‘optimal targets’ — and the documentation of what happened is surely a good thing.

But what stunned me was my second reaction: a perplexing disappointment that I still don’t know whether I was his only victim. Of course, I didn’t want others to have experienced what I did. But I did want some confirmation that his behavior was part of a pattern.

In the 1960s, Catholic priests were a special class of bachelors, fed pot roast dinners by a bucket brigade of parish women, so when Father Bradel came to our house in central Pennsylvania for the first of many regular visits, my mother got out the good china.

Then our family sat stifled into silence as he held forth on evils of the changing times, reserving special fury for the New Mass, where the organ was replaced by a guitar and tambourine, and where laypeople carried felt banners decorated with handprints and doves. Taking her cue, my mother once asked him what he thought of my Catholic high school teacher who’d assigned the book “A Clockwork Orange” to his class despite a church ban on the movie.

We weren’t just Mass-on-Sunday Catholics. My mother had laundered the parish vestments when the parish was newly founded, and my father put 10 percent of his take-home pay in the collection basket every week for his entire life. My sisters and I went to parochial school; I wrote flowery poems about the Virgin Mary for the church bulletin. And in the dining room, behind

where Father Bradel sat, hung a gold-framed reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper."

When my mother asked about the Catholic teacher's defiant assignment, the priest slammed his palm on table. The plates jumped. The water in the water glasses sloshed. The lamp over the table vibrated ever so slightly. "I want to know what Patty thinks," he said. He turned his mastiff-like head in my direction. My three younger sisters looked at me in awe, as if they were expecting me to turn the water into wine. My father looked on in pity. My mother adopted a pose of polite curiosity.

I found myself answering, slowly at first, then, under the blaze of his questions, articulating an opinion in favor of the assignment. Until now, ours was a home where only the adults had opinions. I waited to be sent away from the table for this heresy — or for my mother to mete out the real punishment later, to the backs of my legs with a wooden spoon. But when I finished, Father Bradel made the sign of the cross over my head. My father exhaled. My mother adopted a tight smile. Amen.

The dinners became a tradition. One night, Father Bradel arrived early. My mother, who grew up in an era when girls tap-danced or recited poetry for guests, said to me, "Go in the living room and entertain Father Bradel." She ushered the two of us into the living room, that museum of suburban propriety, and left. Father Bradel and I stood there awkwardly, as if we were waiting to be introduced. He was wearing a long black cassock and stiff white clerical collar; I was in my school uniform and knee socks.

With no warning, he pulled me to him, crushing me in the blackness of his robe, my cheek so close to his heart that I could hear it pounding. He pulled back, appraising me. I looked away, terrified by this display, focusing intently on a nearby studio portrait of me and my sisters. He bent his knees, so we

were at eye level, and tipped my chin toward him. Then he kissed me, his lips wet and flaccid, his mouth open wide enough that his teeth dug into my lower lip. His tongue probed for mine. I stood frozen, my arms at my sides.

It was my first kiss.

## **No one had to tell me it was my duty to give this strange comfort to our parish priest.**

This ritual, where I would be told to entertain Father Bradel in the living room, then be the star student at the dinner table, took place three or four times a year all throughout high school; it was as unchanging as the consecration of the host at Mass. No one had to tell me it was my duty to give this strange comfort to our parish priest. I knew from my catechism book that following the wishes of authority figures was a way of “showing God how much we love him. We show this especially when we obey in something we do not feel like doing.” More than that, I wanted desperately to believe that this man saw something special in me — intelligence, maybe? A rebellious spirit? Or a deep, keening loneliness that he shared.

A few years later, when I was in college, Father Bradel called to say he was coming to take me out to dinner. “Don’t wear jeans,” he said. He took me to a fancy restaurant outside Philadelphia where there was one menu “for the gentleman,” with prices, and another “for the lady.” He ordered a Manhattan. I ordered a Tab.

“Maybe you’ve heard,” he said. “I’m leaving the priesthood.”

I hadn’t heard.

“I’ve come for your blessing,” he added.

I understood that the moment was significant, that it was a rite of some kind, something like the moment when a young man asks a girl's father for her hand in marriage. But I had no idea what my role was. Whatever dark power he had possessed back in my suburban dining room, where he had made me feel special, was gone. I saw him as he was: a 53-year-old man in clerical garb at a restaurant where, all around us, people his age were out for a romantic dinner. I just wanted to get out of there. Maybe I could have him drop me off at the dive bar where they took my fake ID.

"It's O.K. with me," I said.

## **I didn't plan to take legal action. I just wanted to make a report.**

Then, years later, my mother told me, out of the blue, that the local diocese had a list. "Your name is on it," she said. "It's about Father Bradel."

I didn't know why there would be such a list, but I told her that he used to kiss me every time I had to entertain him.

She put her hand over her heart. "Not Father Bradel!" she said.

I decided to notify church officials in the Harrisburg diocese about what had happened with Father Bradel — and to try and find out what list my mother was talking about. I told the priest to whom my call was transferred that I didn't plan to take legal action or want a monetary settlement. I just wanted to make a report. The other end of the line was quiet. "Do you want to know the name of the priest?" I said. "It was Fred Bradel, from Good Shepherd."

"He's been dead for several years," the man said, not missing a beat. "So there's nothing we can do about it now."

I'd somehow expected that the man would need a few minutes to search his records, but he seemed to have the information at his fingertips. "He left the priesthood in 1975 and was laicized in 1977," he continued. "He hasn't been a priest for 28 years."

I told him I knew that. "I'm calling," I said, "because I'd heard my name is on a list compiled by the diocese."

"I don't know about any list," he said. "I can assure you he never would have done anything to be on a list."

I asked if I could report my experience, for the record. "The diocese has a clinical support counselor you can talk to," he said.

"Oh," I said. "So, who are you?"

"My role is to be the advocate for the priests."

It took me a minute to understand: My call had been forwarded not to a victim's advocate but to the priest in charge of defending the other priests.

I called back and spoke to the diocese counselor. He took notes; asked questions; and, I remember, promised to pass my report on to the district attorney. And he apologized on behalf of the church. The seriousness with which he treated my account worked a small miracle. It made real what had once been unspeakable.

I had long ago lost my faith in the Catholic Church, which had been so meaningful to me. But this man seemed determined to do anything he could to help me heal.

"Will you check into whether anyone else reported Father Bradel?" I asked.

He called a week later to apologize. He wasn't allowed to talk about other victims.

Now, thanks to a grand jury in Pennsylvania, there's a real list — and it includes my report to the counselor. My name isn't on it. I'm identified simply as “the survivor” who reported “years of inappropriate behavior.”

There are several names I recognize in the lengthy report from Pennsylvania: a priest from the parish five miles to the east of mine; a priest from the parish four miles to the west; a priest who taught at my high school. I read the report feeling sick, digesting the accounts of rape, the long list of names with cases involving “indecent behavior” and “child pornography” — and was heartbroken to imagine who among my classmates also were harmed.

I'm grateful that the attorney general did what the diocese wouldn't. I'm still curious, though, as to whether I'm the only one Father Bradel preyed upon. I hope so. But I doubt it.

**Patricia McCormick is the author of books for young adults, including the novel “Sold.”**

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