

[Adult Victims of Clergy Abuse -- They Suffer in Silence](#)

When you think about someone abused by a member of the clergy - a Catholic priest in particular - you don't think of someone like Peggy Warren; a married woman, mother of five wonderful children, a staunch Catholic and woman of faith. When we think clergy abuse, we think of 9-year-old altar boys, choir boys with candlelight illuminating their cherubic faces, troubled kids, maybe, who get referred to their priest for counseling, but in turn get abused.

So you see, Peggy is not the kind of victim whose story makes it to the newsprint or the prime time newscast. Peggy is one of many adult victims of clergy sexual abuse. Their abusive relationship often gets branded as "consensual" simply because they are of an age when they have the so-called ability to give consent to have sex as opposed to a minor or a child. But Peggy's poignant tale is a classic illustration of how such a relationship cannot be consensual simply because there is a power differential involved. Her story shows that adults like her are as helpless as little children when it comes to their feelings about a man of cloth. That sense of trust, reverence and obligation to obey pervades through the mind of an adult as it does in the mind of a child.

Peggy and her husband Brent were first introduced to Father Nicholas Voelker in July 2002 when he was assigned to their parish in Kansas. At first, Peggy and her husband didn't suspect Voelker for a second. They worked together in couples counseling classes and other church programs. The Warrens were exemplary Catholics, ever ready to volunteer their time and energy for their church and faith. In Peggy's mind, Voelker stood for everything that was pure and Godly.

"I never gave a second thought to the idea that a member of the clergy is anyone but a holy, chosen man of God," she says. "But after I consider what happened to me, there is a great deal of doubt in my mind about how Christ-like they are."

Over a period of two years, Voelker quickly and efficiently made his way into the inner circles of the Warren family, winning their love, respect and trust. He played with the children, had all-night conversations with Peggy and Brent about faith, conquering their hearts and putting himself on a pedestal, in a place where no one could question his actions. Once he achieved their unquestioned trust, Peggy says, he started showing his true colors; he started manipulating Peggy.

"He would talk about how his father was an alcoholic and he'd start whining about having to help needy parishioners, which was by the way, his job," she says.

Voelker started to do something Peggy thought very strange. He started to kiss Peggy on the lips every time they met. He eventually added hugs which became closer and stronger. When she questioned him about it, Voelker simply brushed it off as something he did all the time, a way of greeting a close friend. Then, the uncomfortable conversations began. He started complimenting her on her looks, her hair and her clothes and told her how beautiful she was and would even say he wouldn't come between her and Brent.

"I didn't understand what he was saying," Peggy says. "I was so naive. I couldn't even imagine why or how a celibate priest would come between me and my husband."

But he padded it all with spiritual and religious talk, calling her his "spiritual spouse" and his "Mary Magdalene." He singled her out in church, making her feel special. So, Peggy says, she didn't make a big deal out of the kissing, the hugging and the weird talk. But soon, the unthinkable happened. One night after their usual round of conversations, Voelker molested Peggy. He was about to give Peggy a hug, so she thought, when he pulled her down on top of him. She was stunned and speechless. She couldn't find any words or her breath. Voelker was startled and kept asking, "Did I hurt you? Did I hurt you?" over and over again. She eventually sputtered a "No", which wasn't true. He did hurt her, mortally, not physically but emotionally.

"I was in a fog," she says. "I remember crawling into bed that night feeling very dirty, anxious and uncomfortable and I lay next to my sleeping, unsuspecting husband."

She started to realize that his prior "hugs" when he squeezed her tightly were not done innocent. Peggy was horrified and nauseated when it hit her that Voelker had actually gotten aroused and relieved himself sexually when he hugged her.

"I felt used and abused," Peggy says. "And through all of it I was in utter disbelief that the man who would do that to me happened to be my priest!"

The second time Voelker touched her inappropriately was when he invited himself on the Warrens' family vacation. He picked a time when Peggy was

alone and started to "dry-hump" and kiss her in their rented condo. She would later find out that one of her daughters saw it all happen.

These events had a tremendous impact on Peggy's marriage. She and Brent tried to forget what had happened, but ended up fighting a lot and ended up in marriage counseling. They wanted to make sure that Voelker would get kicked out of church and be exposed for the dangerous predator that he was, but Peggy was wrong. None of that happened. The bishop sent him for "treatment" to some facility, but Peggy knew that he would soon be sent to another parish where he could repeat his despicable actions on another unsuspecting woman.

"At first I thought this happened only to young boys," she said. "But when I got on the Internet and did some research I found that there are thousands of women just like me -- married women, single women, even nuns. I found one statistic that says priests are four times as likely to have a sexual relationship with a woman than with a minor. For some reason I did find comfort in that statistic...but ultimately I just felt nauseated."

She wanted to pursue criminal charges against Voelker, but was horrified when she heard the DA at a press conference on television saying that they were not criminally charging Voelker because they found it to be a consensual relationship between two adults.

"I was shocked because their investigation did not involve me, they didn't talk to me or get my side of the story at all," Peggy says. "On the contrary, when I talked to the DA, she simply said, 'Well, it was a natural progression in your relationship.' She told me that I kissed him. Yes, I kissed him in greeting and leaving. I was furious and felt like I'd been stabbed in the back."

Peggy says she decided not to pursue a civil lawsuit because she was seven months pregnant at the time and couldn't stand the thought of losing her baby over the emotional stress of a court hearing. So they took a \$15,750 settlement from the Catholic Church.

"Our attorneys told us we were leaving money on the table, but Brent and I made a decision that the money just wasn't worth our baby's life," she says.

The church agreed to pay for their daughter's therapy too, but that would mean she would have to visit a Catholic Charities counselor for evaluation.

"At that point we had lost all our trust and faith in the Catholic Church and were definitely not going to send our daughter to that place," Peggy says.

Her experience with Voelker shook her faith at its very root.

"My whole world was turned upside down," Peggy says. "When you are born and raised Catholic, faith is a part of your lifestyle. These priests, who are predators, prey on those who are true believers. They cast their net on women who wouldn't doubt their intentions for a split second."

Her 12-year-old daughter now says she doesn't believe in God after she saw what a so-called man of God did to her mother.

"I still believe in God, but she's seen what I went through and doesn't want that to ever happen again," Peggy says.

The abuse affected her in every possible way -- physically, emotionally and psychologically.

"I wasn't able to keep down food," she says. "I lost my faith, my trust in human beings. I thank God for my children and my husband and all the good friends who formed a support network helping me get through hell."

Peggy is now an advocate herself for those abused by clergy. She runs a web site, to bring attention to adults being abused by members of the clergy. She speaks at conferences and workshops, building on that awareness. She is even working hard to get a bill passed in Kansas that would include clergy in fiduciary duty laws.

"The success hasn't been great so far, but every year I feel like I'm making progress and creating more awareness in the process," she says. "I find the work I'm doing in this field wonderful and very healing."

Not many people realize how many adult victims of clergy sex abuse are suffering in silence, Peggy says.

"More adult victims need to come forward and tell their stories," she says. "You can't just believe that you can ignore it and it'll go away." Also, when victims don't come forward, there is the risk of the abuse happening to other people.

For Peggy herself, it's an ongoing process.

"I'm on the road to recovery," she says. "It's a long road. But I'm hopeful I'll make it with the help of family and friends."

About the Author

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