

A Mother, a Sick Son and His Father, the Priest

O'FALLON, Mo. — With three small children and her marriage in trouble, Pat Bond attended a spirituality retreat for Roman Catholic women in Illinois 26 years ago in hopes of finding support and comfort.



Not What He Hoped For



Ms. Bond and Nathan read cards from volunteers for cancer support groups.



Pat Bond and Father Willenborg on a vacation.

What Ms. Bond found was a priest — a dynamic, handsome Franciscan friar in a brown robe — who was serving as the spiritual director for the retreat

and agreed to begin counseling her on her marriage. One day, she said, as she was leaving the priest's parlor, he pulled her aside for a passionate kiss.

Ms. Bond separated from her husband, and for the next five years she and the priest, the Rev. Henry Willenborg, carried on an intimate relationship, according to interviews and court documents. In public, they were both leaders in their Catholic community in Quincy, Ill. In private they functioned like a married couple, sharing a bed, meals, movie nights and vacations with the children.

Eventually they had a son, setting off a series of legal battles as Ms. Bond repeatedly petitioned the church for child support. The Franciscans acquiesced, with the stipulation that she sign a confidentiality agreement. It is now an agreement she is willing to break as both she and her child, Nathan Halbach, 22, are battling cancer.

With little to lose, they are eager to tell their stories: the mother, a once-faithful Catholic who says the church protected a philandering priest and treated her as a legal adversary, and the son, about what it was like to grow up knowing his absentee father was a priest.

"I've always called him Father Henry — never Father, never Dad," said Nathan, at home between hospital visits. "I always felt he picked religion over me."

The relationship between Ms. Bond and the priest is hardly unique. While the recent scandals involving the [Roman Catholic Church](#) have focused on the sexual abuse of children, experts say that incidences of priests who have violated sexual and emotional boundaries with adult women are far more common.

Clergy members of many faiths have crossed the line with women and had children out of wedlock. But the problem is particularly fraught for the Catholic Church, as Catholics in many countries are increasingly questioning the celibacy requirement for priests. Ms. Bond's case offers a rare look at how the church goes to great lengths to silence these women, to avoid large settlements and to keep the priests in active ministry. She has

23 years of documents, depositions, correspondence, receipts and photographs relating to her case, which she has kept in meticulous files.

Those files reveal that the church was tightfisted with her as she tried to care for her son, particularly as his cancer treatments grew more costly. But they also show that Father Willenborg suffered virtually no punishment, continuing to serve in a variety of church posts.

The church entity Ms. Bond dealt with is the [Order of Friars Minor](#), commonly known as the Franciscans, whose members were known as mendicants because they survived on handouts from the communities they served.

“I know better than Franciscans what it’s like to beg, because nothing has happened without my begging the Franciscans,” said Ms. Bond, who is 53.

Church officials, however, say they acted generously.

“The province went well beyond what the law would require, and was concerned for the boy and his well-being,” said the Rev. William Spencer, provincial minister of the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart, which is Father Willenborg’s province in St. Louis. “We were willing to do whatever we could to respond to him.”

The priest Ms. Bond fell in love with so many years ago, Father Willenborg, is currently the senior pastor of [Our Lady of the Lake](#), a large, historic parish of 1,350 families on the shores of Lake Superior in Ashland, Wis. The church spire is visible from miles away, and the parish operates an adjoining school. On a recent Sunday, Father Willenborg affably led a morning Mass for about 300 people, adding a special blessing for the grandparents in the congregation. Afterward, in his office, he acknowledged that he does have a son, is aware his son is terminally ill, and said that he had tried to be attentive.

He said he did not want to talk about the situation, and pointed out that Ms. Bond had more to lose than he did because she had signed a confidentiality agreement that, if broken, requires her to pay a penalty. He

asserted that Ms. Bond had shown no care for his needs and was only concerned about money, and that his son had shunned him. He said that he and the Franciscans had done nothing bad.

“We’ve been very caring, very supportive, very generous over these 20-something years. It’s very tragic what’s going on with Nathan, but, you know?” said Father Willenborg, before trailing off and ending the interview.

‘A Chosen One’

Father Willenborg’s Franciscan superiors were aware of his relationship with Ms. Bond well before Nathan was born. A year earlier, Father Willenborg and Ms. Bond had conceived another child. Ms. Bond said that Father Willenborg suggested she have an abortion, which she found unthinkable. He finally informed his Franciscan superiors of their liaison.

The pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. The Franciscans kept Father Willenborg in place as rector of their seminary in Quincy, Ill.

The couple then resolved to keep the relationship platonic, according to Ms. Bond, (whose recounting of events is consistent with what Father Willenborg said in a legal deposition). But a few months later, during an Easter-season retreat they had planned together for about 90 women, Father Willenborg showed up at her door. Ms. Bond said she was sure that Nathan was conceived that night.

Their relationship, she said, made her feel happier than she ever had in her life. She would watch him work, and feel proud that he was a comfort to so many people. As a Catholic, she said she knew their relationship was wrong, but she was also swept up in the feeling that there was something spiritual and even exalted about it.

“Here I am this small-town girl, and at the time I didn’t feel that I was very attractive,” she said, “and yet he’s putting his vows on the side and he wants to be with me, in the most intimate, loving way. It was quite an honor.”

“It’s such a powerful thing because you think — and this is the illness of it, too — you are led to believe and you let yourself believe, that you are a chosen one. That you are so special,” she said, adding of the priest, “It’s not that they’re putting God aside, it’s that they’re bringing you up to their level.”

Before their baby was born, the Franciscans strongly advised Ms. Bond to give it up for adoption, the correspondence shows. She refused.

“What would I say to my other children, after coming home from the hospital: ‘I’m sorry, I forgot to bring your family member home?’” she said.

Father Willenborg himself performed the baptism. Ms. Bond named the boy Nathan John Paul Halbach, giving him the last name of her former husband, who was still an involved father to the three children they had together and supported them financially.

Ms. Bond retained a lawyer, and the Franciscans gave her \$1,000 toward the costs of the birth that were not covered by insurance, and \$505 toward baby furniture. The Franciscans further agreed to pay \$600 a month for the baby’s first 10 months, until Ms. Bond could return to work in a travel agency, and after that \$350 a month in child support until Nathan turned 18. It added up, after bank and legal fees, to about \$85,000 paid in a lump sum.

End to an idyll

For eight months, Father Willenborg continued to visit Ms. Bond’s home at night. She said he would go right to the crib, pick up the baby and bring him to the bed to cuddle with them.

An unexpected turn of events brought their idyll to an end. A young woman showed up at Ms. Bond’s house in a rage. She told Ms. Bond that she had been in a sexual relationship with Father Willenborg for years, since she was in high school. (Reached by phone last week, the woman confirmed the relationship, and said it had caused her a lifetime of pain. She asked to remain anonymous.) Immediately, the Franciscans sent Father Willenborg

to a treatment center in New Mexico run by a religious order, for priests with sexual disorders and substance addictions.

Ms. Bond says that after that, they had sex together only once more: immediately after he returned from seven months at the center. She still has the receipt from the hotel room.

In a deposition years later, Father Willenborg said that the Franciscans had never disciplined him, and never suggested that he leave religious life. He was assigned to New Orleans to work with AIDS patients, and a few years later to the headquarters of his order's province in St. Louis to oversee "spiritual formation" for priests, which includes educating them on how to remain celibate.

Ms. Bond, meanwhile, got help from a support group for women and priests involved in relationships. The group, [Good Tidings](#), was founded by Cait Finnegan and her husband, a former Catholic priest, originally with the idea that they would help priests who had fallen in love to discern whether to leave the priesthood and marry, or remain in the priesthood and end the relationship.

"We were naïve," Mrs. Finnegan said. "We quickly discovered that many of these priests were playboys. They weren't looking for any discernment, they were simply staying and playing. It was the women who needed the support. Unfortunately, many women accept the kind of abuse from a priest that they would never accept if they were dating another man."

She said that in 25 years, Good Tidings had been contacted by nearly 2,000 women who said they were involved with priests, many who had signed child support and confidentiality agreements like Ms. Bond's. There are similar support groups in at least seven countries.

A landmark study in 1990 by the scholar A. W. Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine, found that 20 percent of Catholic priests were involved in continuing sexual relationships with women, and an additional 8 percent to 10 percent had occasional heterosexual relationships.

“It’s not so much that people don’t know it happens, but they don’t know how much it happens,” Mrs. Finnegan said.

Father Willenborg had no contact again with his son until the boy was 13. Nathan remembers being so excited to finally meet his biological father that he insisted on getting a haircut. He remembers that Father Willenborg took him to McDonald’s and to see the movie “What Women Want.”

Nathan recalled, “It was sort of hard meeting this guy for the first time, at a place where we couldn’t talk to each other.”

In the next few years, Nathan said his disappointment grew. Father Willenborg did not visit, though he lived only 15 minutes away. He had promised to take Nathan to a baseball game, but it was two years before he stopped by and later called to say he had tickets. Nathan finally told Father Willenborg he did not want to see him.

The child support money had run out long before Nathan turned 18. Ms. Bond had used \$38,000 of it as a down payment on a house. She remarried, twice, and her last husband was a lawyer who encouraged Ms. Bond to petition the Franciscans for money to help send Nathan to college.

The Franciscans resisted, and they ended up in court. Father Willenborg insisted on a DNA test, which showed the probability of paternity was 99.9 percent.

“That really pushed me away further,” Nathan said. “It was ridiculous. He knew I was his son.”

After months of court proceedings, the Franciscans agreed to pay half of Nathan’s college expenses, plus \$586 a month, until he turned 21.

Charles Todt, who served as a lawyer for Ms. Bond, said, “They spent the least amount they could possibly spend under any circumstances.”

In his second year at the [University of Missouri](#), Nathan began seeing double. He became dizzy and had problems remembering things. He was found to have brain tumors, and they were growing fast.

Illness and Mounting Costs

With the costs mounting for chemotherapy, radiation and craniotomies, Ms. Bond again turned to the church. The Franciscans agreed to pay 50 percent of any “extraordinary” medical costs, until he turned 23. Ms. Bond said she was greatly relieved. She was involved in a messy divorce with her third husband, and could not go back to work because caring for her son had become a full-time job.

She finally found a doctor at [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#) in New York City who proposed an experimental treatment on Nathan’s tumors, which had returned despite all the previous treatments. They flew to New York for a one-week consultation, and ended up staying for three months while he was in and out of the hospital for treatment.

The Franciscans initially gave them \$1,000 toward the trip, but then refused Ms. Bond’s further requests for reimbursements for lodging expenses for her and Nathan in New York. This is what pushed her over the edge, she said. Dozens of e-mail messages between Ms. Bond and church lawyers document the back-and-forth. Catherine A. Schroeder, the Franciscans’ lawyer, said Ms. Bond failed to provide proper receipts, an accusation that Ms. Bond denies.

The head of the province then was the Rev. Michael Perry, who was recently elected vicar general of the entire Order of Friars Minor. Reached at his office in Rome, Father Perry declined to speak on the record about the decisions he made, except to say, “Efforts were made not only to respect the law but to take into account the dignity and the rights and the care of the child.”

To pay for the New York trip, Ms. Bond’s daughter Carrie Milton liquidated her [401\(k\)](#) plan and sold T-shirts that said, “Cancer Sucks,” and Ms. Bond’s son Christian Halbach emptied his savings account.

Ms. Bond prays to God constantly. But she has long left the Catholic Church and attends a Methodist church.

Nathan is now so ill that he rarely leaves his house except for hospital visits. The highlight of his day is lumbering to the mailbox, leaning on his mother, who was told recently by doctors that she had carcinoid tumors in her appendix and colon. Strangers who get Nathan's name and address from Web sites for cancer victims send him dozens of cards, often homemade, urging him not to give up.

Recently the mail included a card from Father Willenborg.

"I never understood," Nathan said, "why he thought cards could make it all O.K."

Taken from the New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/16/us/16priest.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all#