

Telling Secrets

The victim of an abusive Massachusetts priest, Phil Saviano shines a light on the church's dark past and its questionable future

By Maureen Turner; photos by Kate Flock
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http://www.snapnetwork.org/links_homepage/Telling_Secrets.htm

[See also Saviano's 2002 speech "[What took you so long?](#)" and Margery Eagan's [profile of Saviano](#). See the full text of an important [1971 letter by Bishop Flanagan regarding Fr. Holley](#). For links to many other church documents, see the 1993 [Holley affidavit](#). View a [2002 Swedish TV report](#) containing a detailed interview with Saviano.]

Here are a few of Phil Saviano's vivid childhood memories:

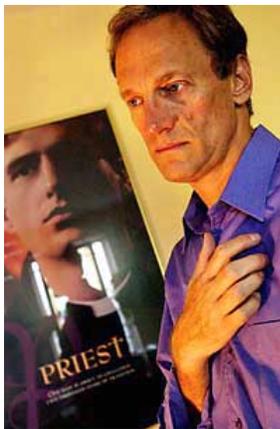
He remembers being forced by a priest to have sex in a hallway outside the sacristy of St. Denis Church, while on the other side of the wall, unsuspecting parishioners were praying at the stations of the cross.

He remembers being made to perform oral sex on the same priest in the basement of the church, while, just outside, he could hear the parish's groundskeeper going about his work. Part of him hoped the groundskeeper would walk by, glance in the window, see what was happening and save him. Part of him was terrified this would happen, terrified that he'd be "caught" engaging in behavior that, even though it was forced on him, he still found shameful and embarrassing.

Almost 40 years later, it's still somewhat embarrassing to Saviano. But that doesn't stop him from recounting these memories to complete strangers -- to reporters, to student groups, to activists, to other victims of abuse. He does it knowing that some people might not want to hear his story, that some will even resent him for telling it. He does it knowing that these personal, painful memories will end up in newspapers and be read by thousands of people he'll never know.

But he does it anyway. He does it to show other victims that they're not alone. He does it with the hope that the people who read or hear his story will walk away with a better understanding of what victims of abuse go through. And he does it for his own peace of mind. After years of carrying around the "dirty secret" of his abuse, telling his story is a way to exorcise some of the pain and shame that made him feel as if he were somehow complicit in the horrible things that happened to him.

Five years ago, Saviano started the New England chapter of SNAP, or Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests. SNAP, which now has more than 30 chapters scattered around the country, is part support group and part activist group that seeks legal justice for abuse victims. Over the years, Saviano has seen other survivors experience the same kind of release he's found by telling the story of his abuse. "The way I describe it is the victims taking back some of the power that was stolen from them when they were kids," he says.

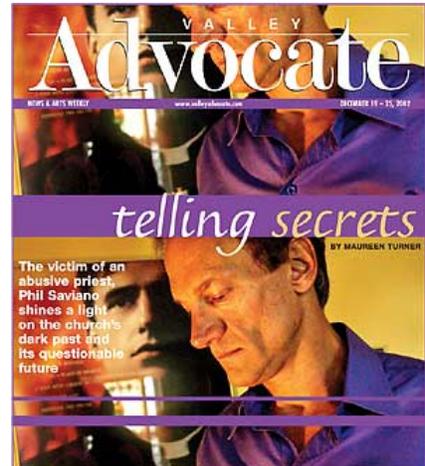


"People who a year ago couldn't get through a phone conversation with me without breaking into tears, I see them now at a podium talking to hundreds of people, being very confident, being very empowered and helping ensure that the kids of the future won't have to go through the kinds of things we do."

One evening earlier this month, Saviano told his story to a group of students at Amherst College. His speech was co-sponsored by the campus Newman Club and by Peer Advocates of Sexual Respect, a group of students trained to provide counseling to abuse victims.

Saviano is a handsome man with blond hair and an engaging smile that's a little sad around the edges. He's also a poised, affecting speaker who had his audience's rapt attention from the moment he began speaking. At one point in his speech, he stopped for a sip of water, then looked up. "Are you with me?" he asked. His riveted listeners responded with murmurs and mute nods.

The story begins in the spring of 1964, when Saviano was 11 years old and a new pastor came to St. Denis parish, in the small Worcester County town of East Douglas.



"The church, which should have been the safest place in the world for me, even safer than my own home, became a dark, foreboding place."

The pastor, Father David A. Holley, was a stranger, new to town. But that didn't matter; he was a priest, and so he was immediately and unquestioningly welcomed into the community, into his parishioners' homes, into their personal business and family secrets. He was also granted immediate, unquestioning access to the parish's children -- the altar boys, the kids who came to confession, children who, like Saviano, were drawn to this charming, friendly 34-year-old man who knew card tricks and told the kinds of jokes that crack up kids.

"Because he wore the black jacket with the white collar, no one ever wondered about his romantic or sexual life, because he was assumed to be celibate," Saviano says. "What a great set-up for a child molester."

Saviano and his best friend spent a lot of time at St. Denis'. Phil was both a parishioner and the neighborhood paperboy; his friend was an altar boy. On Saturdays, they went to the church for weekly catechism class. One day after class, Holley pulled the two boys aside. He needed help moving some boxes and would pay them 50 cents each if they'd stay to assist him. They eagerly agreed. He asked them to stay late again the next week, and the week after that.

"We thought we were lucky that such an entertaining man would take such an interest in us kids," Saviano recalls.

At first, the visits were innocent. The boys would help the priest, enjoying the chance to spend time with this attentive adult. One day, Holley showed them a deck of playing cards; on the backs were black-and-white photos of nude women. "His possession of these cards [was] our first little secret," Saviano says.

A few weeks later, Holley had another deck of cards. These were in color, and, this time, some of the nude photos were of men. That led to a conversation between the priest and the two boys about sex.

"The thing about Father Holley -- and all good child molesters -- is he drew us in gradually," Saviano says. What started as a couple of forbidden conversations about sex moved to the priest's exposing himself to the boys, then forcing them into sexual acts. For almost a year and half, Saviano says, he was repeatedly abused by the priest, always on the church grounds: "The church, which should have been the safest place in the world for me, even safer than my own home, became a dark, foreboding place."

Saviano tried to resist the priest's advances. But he felt trapped; his only option, he thought, was to simply go along. "The sooner I give him what he wants, the sooner I can get out of here," he would think to himself.



The only person he spoke to about the abuse was his friend, who was also being abused by Holley. They tried to figure out ways to make the priest stop. Going to an adult just didn't seem to be an option. Who would believe them, take the word of two young boys over the word of a priest? Saviano feared that if he told his father -- who, he says, was "an angry man" -- he'd be the one who'd end up in trouble, blamed for the horrible things that were happening to him.

"It really broke my young spirit," Saviano says. Like many victims of abuse, he became withdrawn, as he tried to compartmentalize the ongoing abuse from the rest of his daily life. But he could never put it out of his mind completely. He worried about the moral implications of what was happening to him. If he was run over by a bus one day, he wondered, would he go to hell? On the other hand, wasn't it a sin to disobey a priest, the moral and spiritual leader of his community?

"You know what I did," Saviano says. "Like a good Catholic boy, I obeyed. Then I went to confession."

The problem was, his confessor was also his abuser. "How could I bring it up in confession without implying he was also sinful?" Finally, Saviano hit on a discreet way to confess.

"I yelled at my mother," he'd say as he knelt in the confessional. "I hit my brother."

"And you know the rest."

The priest did know the rest. But he never acknowledged that. He'd simply give the boy penance to perform and send him on his way. "How could he forgive my sins if he was in sin himself?" Saviano now says.

Then one day in the fall of 1965, 18 months after he arrived at St. Denis, Father Holley was suddenly gone. Saviano didn't know what had happened to the priest. He just knew that Holley was gone, and that he was finally free from the abuse he'd suffered for more than a year. Except, he found out, he would never truly be free of it.

Twenty-six years later, Saviano sat down to read his morning Boston Globe and was stunned by what he saw: an article about a priest who'd been arrested for molesting children in New Mexico.

"I saw the name, David Holley, and I gasped as if I'd been struck by lightning. ... No one had ever stopped this guy."

Like other survivors of sexual abuse, Saviano had spent his entire life dealing with the fallout of what had happened to him: the loss of his faith and his ability to trust other people; feelings of worthlessness; depression; the struggle to have healthy intimate relationships.

"I went from being a carefree, outgoing, trusting kid to a teenager who was emotionally shut down," he says. He became a loner whose depression got so bad that he attempted suicide his senior year of high school.

Things got a little better the next year; Saviano came to UMass-Amherst for college and buried himself in his schoolwork. He had a couple of short-term girlfriends. Then, his senior year, he found himself developing an intense crush on another male student in his dorm.

Saviano realized he was gay, and it terrified him. After the abuse he suffered as a child, he was frightened by the thought of having an intimate relationship with another man; if someone showed an interest in him, he says, he felt threatened. Finally, he decided to simply plunge in head first. One night, he hitchhiked into Boston and headed to a gay bar on the edge of the Combat Zone. He deliberately went with little money and no place to stay for the night. That, he figured, left him no choice but to allow himself to be picked up by someone who'd take him home for sex. It was a way, he now says, to simply get his first consensual sexual encounter with a man over with.

"I got much more than I bargained for," Saviano recalls. Too scared to speak to the other patrons, he struck up a conversation with the bartender, who agreed to take him back to his place for the night at the end of his shift. When they got there, the bartender raped Saviano. Then, the man's boyfriend, who Saviano didn't realize was in the apartment, raped him too. "Thus began my life as a gay man," he says wryly.

Eventually, Saviano did have a long-term, stable relationship. Then, in 1984, at the age of 32, he was diagnosed with AIDS. The illness prompted him to see a therapist, who helped Saviano finally deal with his childhood abuse and its effects on his life. But while his mental health was improving, his physical health got worse. By early 1992, he was so sick that he'd written a will and begun planning his own funeral.

Around this time, Saviano became aware of a controversy that was erupting in the Catholic church. A group of people had publicly accused Father James Porter, a priest from the Fall River area, of abusing them when they were children. Saviano recalls the Boston archdiocese dismissing the case as an "isolated incident" that had been blown out of proportion by the media. He knew it wasn't an isolated incident, and he recalls wondering how many other people had been through the same thing but weren't telling their stories.

Meanwhile, Saviano began to regain his health after his doctor put him on the AIDS drug AZT. Saviano had tried AZT before but had stopped taking it after a few weeks because of the serious side effects he experienced. But this time, much to his surprise, it worked. His energy level and his appetite increased, his lungs cleared and he began to gain back the weight he had lost. "The phoenix was rising from the ashes," he says.

But it wasn't until later that year, when Saviano saw the Globe story about Holley -- he still remembers the day it appeared: Dec. 17, 1992 -- that he began to get active. He called the reporter and asked for help getting in touch with the man in the article who'd also been abused by the priest. The two men spoke and compared stories; Holley, it turned out, had been transferred to New Mexico after it had been discovered that he'd abused children in the Worcester diocese.

Saviano was angry to realize that the church had continued to allow Holley to work in parishes, even after his record of abuse was known. That's when he decided to tell his own story publicly, to let people know that, like the Fall River cases, Holley's crimes in New Mexico were not an "isolated incident."

The fact that he thought he was dying made the decision to go public easier, Saviano says. "If I had been a healthier guy, if I'd been a guy with a career, if I'd been a guy with a wife and kids to worry about, I don't know if I'd have the courage. ... But I was living on borrowed time."

Saviano called his brothers and told them what had happened to him all those years before. He called his therapist, and he called the Globe reporter and set up an interview. Saviano told the reporter about his experiences with Holley, but he didn't tell him that he was gay or that he had AIDS. He was worried that if he did, the church would use it to discredit him and that would scare off other victims from coming forward with their stories, he says.

The night before the story was set to run, Saviano called his father to prepare him. The response he got was no better than what he feared it would have been 30 years ago, when the 11-year-old boy was too scared to tell his father about the abuse. His father, he says, "raked him over the coals" and told him he'd bring shame to his home town.

Saviano's story appeared in the Globe and was quickly picked up by the national media. The Worcester diocese, in response, denied knowing anything about Holley's abusing children while in its jurisdiction.

But Saviano didn't believe it. He spent hours at the library poring over microfiche of newspaper stories from around the country about similar cases of priest abuse. The news about Holley, meanwhile, prompted other people to step forward with their own accusations that they'd been abused by other priests in the diocese. Saviano realized the scope of the problem, and he saw a repeated pattern of church officials shielding abusive priests. And he wondered: Had church leaders in Worcester known that Holley was an abuser?

The only way to answer those questions was to get hold of Holley's personnel file. And the only way to do that, Saviano realized, was to sue the diocese. He hired Roderick Macleish Jr., a Boston attorney who today represents hundreds of alleged victims of abusive priests.

Saviano eventually got some of the documents he was looking for. They revealed that Holley had been caught multiple times molesting children, had been sent to church-run "treatment centers," then sent on to new parishes, where the parishioners were never told of his past transgressions. The files contained letters that referred to Holley's past in astonishing euphemisms: a 1971 letter from the bishop in Worcester to the bishop in Wilmington, Del., saying that he'd heard that diocese would accept "priests who'd had a problem"; a letters back to the Worcester diocese from a church official in Texas referring to Holley's "continuing affliction."

"If these bishops were going to such extremes to protect Holley, who else were they protecting?" Saviano wondered.

Saviano's case dragged on for years. It was a difficult case to win, he says, because he had to prove not only that he had been abused by Holley but also that the abuse had caused him long-term problems and that Worcester diocese officials had known that Holley was an abuser before he ever touched Saviano. Saviano's attorney advised him to not go to trial. By the summer of 1995, with his health again deteriorating, Saviano decided to drop the case and accept a \$15,000 settlement from the Worcester diocese.

But the settlement came with a condition: Saviano couldn't talk to anyone about the abuse he suffered or about the larger issue of abuse by priests, with the exception of his therapist.

Saviano was dismayed. He'd been through enough therapy to know that keeping these secrets was unhealthy. But his attorney was urging him to sign the agreement, telling him that it was standard practice and that plenty of other victims had already agreed to similar settlements.

Then in October of 1995, as he was mulling over the diocese's offer, Saviano saw another headline in the newspaper: "Catholic Bishops Assail Sex Abuse of Children." It talked about church officials vowing to make the church a safe place. And it included a quote from a church spokeswoman: "We need to say abusive behavior is wrong, and you will be held accountable for it."

"I was floored," Saviano recalls. "Well, if that's the case, why the hell were they trying so hard to silence me?"

Saviano decided not to accept the diocese's offer. "For as long as I was alive, I wasn't going to be keeping the church's big secret," he says. He got hold of the *Globe* and told a reporter his entire story, including the diocese's attempts to gag him. It was tough to do, he says. But he was heartened by the calls of support he got after the story appeared, including a call from a Boston priest who told him many clerics were scared to speak up because they knew they'd be punished for doing so.

By the spring of 1996, the Worcester diocese dropped the confidentiality clause and settled with Saviano, paying him \$12,500. "Retaining my constitutional right to free speech was a great personal victory," he says.

He's not sure why the diocese changed its position. "Perhaps they thought I'd be dead in a matter of months."

But in fact, Saviano's health had improved once again, thanks to a new treatment -- protease inhibitors -- that his doctor had put him on in 1995.

In 1997, Saviano founded the New England chapter of SNAP; he was inspired, he says, after seeing the first victims of Father John Geoghan, the Boston-area priest who was recently convicted of indecent assault of a child, speak up with their stories. Watching them come forward, he says, he was reminded of how lonely he'd felt when he'd first started speaking out about his own abuse: "I thought, you know what, I can help these guys."

Saviano began meeting with other victims and talking to them about their own experiences. "Very soon I became a repository of horror stories," many of them about allegedly abusive priests whose names have been in the news recently. In fact, the priest abuse scandal has come to a head this year, following a new series of articles in the *Globe* that have focused not just on cases of alleged abuse but also on the church's attempts to cover up for abusive priests -- in the process, allowing the abuse to continue.

The *Globe*'s reporting, coupled with the pressure for reform exerted by SNAP and by lay Catholic groups such as Voice of the Faithful, has brought the problem into a clearer focus than it had ever been in the past. And that pressure, in turn, has forced changes that would have seemed impossible just a year ago -- most notably, the resignation last week of Boston Archdiocese Cardinal Bernard Law.

Saviano knew things had really changed last February, on his father's 83rd birthday. Saviano hadn't spoken to his dad since Christmas. In the intervening weeks, the *Globe* had begun its latest series of articles on the scandal. Saviano had been back in the news talking about the issue, and he feared a backlash from his father when they spoke.

But when he called, he says, it was his dad who began talking about the scandal, about the secrets and the lies and the shameful behavior on the part of the church. "He admitted to me that I'd been right all along. Then he said to me those magic words: 'I'm proud of you,' he said. 'Give them hell.'"

For all the time and energy he's spent contemplating his own experience, talking to other victims, examining cases, Saviano still isn't sure why the Catholic church is so plagued by sex abuse scandals.

Other denominations have had their own problems with abusive leaders, he says; in fact, SNAP is open to people of all faiths. Still, Saviano says, "I don't think any other faith has institutionalized child molestation the way the Roman Catholic church has."

While some argue that the church's requirement that priests be celibate might be to blame for the abuse cases, Saviano thinks it's more complicated than that. "It seems pretty simple to me that trying to live a celibate lifestyle is not going to turn you into a child molester, unless that person has a previous affinity," he said in an interview with the *Advocate*.

"I think there is a connection to the celibacy requirement, but it's not the connection that most people think," he added. The requirement, he suggests, creates an environment where a priest who is engaged in a consensual relationship with an adult might hesitate before speaking up about a fellow priest who he knows is molesting children, for fear that his own secret will be exposed. "It becomes a situation where any sort of sexual contact becomes a secret. ... And that sort of environment becomes a really good hiding place for child molesters."

That's an angle many Catholics are loath to pursue, because it touches on the notion of priests breaking their celibacy vow -- and particularly because, in many cases, those relationships are with other men. When Saviano first began talking about his experiences, he avoided acknowledging that he was gay, partly because he objected to the church's attempt to blame the problem on gay priests -- "It's not the orientation of the priest; it's the fact that there's no consequences for bad behavior," he counters -- and partly because he knew some listeners would be less sympathetic to a gay man than a straight man.

Saviano recalls doing an on-air interview with a Texas radio station in which the interviewer asked if he was married. When Saviano told him he wasn't, the interviewer asked if he was gay. Saviano said he was. "Well, I don't know what you're complaining about," the interviewer responded, "because clearly you were going to grow up and have sex with men anyway, so what's the problem? It just started early."

Straight men who were victims of sexual abuse aren't immune to homophobic responses, Saviano adds. "For straight guys who get molested when they're kids or in their early teens, it's tremendously embarrassing for them to come forward and admit it's happened. Whether it's from their peer group, their families, whoever, that's the first thing that comes up: Why did you let this happen? Are you gay and just don't know it?"

"Straight guys agonize over this endlessly, not only when they're teens but still into their adult life. If they don't have a chance to talk about it with other straight guys who've been through the same thing, it really eats away at them as years go by."

Still, in the decade since he first went public with his own story, Saviano has seen some remarkable changes in the public attitude about sex abuse in the church. "In those early days, first of all, people didn't understand what the issue was all about," he said. "They were very, very resistant to believing it, that even a single priest could do things like this. If anything, they thought it was just this one crazy priest but it doesn't have any reflection on the organization as a whole.

"I think there was a great resentment because they thought I was trying to destroy the Catholic church. The term 'Catholic bashing' was used about me over and over again. But I felt the church has to change, and getting stuff out there was the only way to make this a better organization and a safer organization."

Saviano isn't sure just how much the church can ever be reformed. "So far, they're very resistant to change," he said. "They're still very reluctant to think about themselves as individuals to whom the rest of the civil laws of the United States apply. They keep talking about canon law. We keep saying, 'To hell with canon law. We have civil laws, and we expect you to obey them.'"

Throughout his very public work advocating for other abuse survivors, Saviano has continued to try to make sense of his own experience. A few years ago, he actually wrote a letter to Holley, who is serving a 275-year prison sentence for the New Mexico abuse cases. Saviano wrote looking for answers to questions that had long nagged at him: "Why did he become a priest? Was it a religious calling, or was it something else? Was it a great hiding place?"

The two men exchanged several letters, but Saviano never got the answers he was looking for. Holley, he said at his recent speech in Amherst, is "in complete denial." The priest never apologized for what he did, never even acknowledged it; he blames the fact that he's in prison on an incompetent defense attorney, Saviano said.

"It was good for me to get these letters, because it was an insight into his personality," Saviano said. Lately, he added, he's had more questions he'd like to ask the priest and more things he'd like to tell him. "I'm thinking it's time for him and I to have another chat."

Send e-mail to Phil Saviano

Maureen Turner can be reached at mtturner@valleyadvocate.com.