

Enduring years of sexual abuse by a priest, survivor is called 'gently, fully back' to his spiritual home

An assortment of pills filled his mouth when he heard a small voice.

The 15-year-old was standing at the sink in his family's basement. "That's where I was going to end it," said Steve Burnette, now 53.

For three years, the teen had been sexually abused by a priest, a beloved family friend who cracked jokes and shared stories at the dinner table, enjoyed holidays and birthday parties as a prized guest, and – unknown to anyone at the time – spent many nights harming Steve.

Burnette had contemplated suicide before, but on this day, he'd planned to swallow the fatal stash. Then there was the voice.

"It was really, really tiny, and it said, 'Stop. Don't do it,'" Burnette recalled. "It offered me glimpses of a future with joy. It was God, and he was speaking to me."

'I needed someone to look up to'

Burnette was a sensitive, spunky young boy who moved and talked briskly. He spent his days playing with a slew of neighborhood children in a heavily Catholic suburb of Milwaukee, where Burnette and his two younger sisters attended public school.



Burnette on his First Communion day. Courtesy photo

His sister, Linda Dreger, 50, recalls her brother as sweet and clever. “He was always organizing us kids, setting up shows and haunted houses in our garage,” she said.

Growing up with an ardent faith, Burnette once composed a poem about God that he insisted on reading – with gusto – in front of his religious education class. There likely were some eye rolls, Burnette acknowledged with a laugh, but they didn’t dampen his enthusiasm.

He felt loved by his devoutly Catholic parents, and his childhood generally was happy until the third grade.

Burnette believes he had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, known as ADHD. “I was a good kid who followed the rules, but teachers didn’t know how to handle me,” he said. In third grade, the teacher responded to his behavior with cruelty.

One day, Burnette was sitting at his desk and sneezed. “All

this stuff was hanging out of my nose, and my teacher wouldn't let me clean myself up; I just had to sit there like that."

The incident caused his classmates, whom he'd known since kindergarten, to begin making fun of him. Teasing evolved into bullying that followed him into subsequent grades. Countless times, students smashed his head into the ground or pummeled him in the face.

Raised to reject violence, Burnette refused to fight back. When he told his parents, and his father admonished the kids, it made the situation worse. So he opted to keep the tormenting to himself.

Amid these years of bullying, Father James Arimond came into Burnette's life. The priest had been transferred to the family's parish, and parishioners quickly befriended the charismatic pastor.

"In hindsight, he had his eye on me immediately," Burnette said. "He knew I was teased, knew I was bullied, knew I needed someone to look up to. He played that against me."

The priest began inviting the boy on bicycling trips and made him feel special.

After three years of building a bond, Arimond asked to take a photo of Burnette next to his bike with his shirt off.

"That started the whole process of events," Burnette said. He was 12 years old.

The lowest point

The abuse continued throughout high school, and Burnette grew into a painfully shy teenager without friends. With no inkling of what was occurring, his parents welcomed the opportunity for their son to spend time with a priest.

"Everything didn't happen at once," Burnette said. "James

would take it one step further each time." Sometimes the priest would get him drunk. He's not sure what would happen on those occasions.

To endure it all, Burnett learned to shut off his emotions. "James was part of our family, and everyone loved him," he said. "I couldn't say anything. He was this person I'd trusted all those years as a child."

Arimond took the lanky, good-looking teen to parties and dance clubs. "He'd parade me in front of his friends; I was his teenage trophy," Burnette said.

The high school years were "filled with darkness, but there was nothing worse than 15-year-old Steve," recalled Burnette. "That was the lowest point in my life."

He'd learned to cut himself using a razor blade and would slice "death" and "die" into his arm. "I wanted to release all the sadness, because I just couldn't take it," Burnette said.

He also hit his head against walls as a way to cope.

Burnette was able to hide most of the self-harm from his parents; still, they knew something wasn't right and sent him to a counselor. He discovered he was a "cutter" but wasn't ready for counseling and stopped going.

Yet, internal agony led him to gather up pills and take them down to the basement.

"The plan was to die," said Burnette, pausing to choke back tears. "Then there was that gentle voice of God, like from the bottom of a well."

He spit out the pills. Though he'd contemplate suicide again, he'd never go that far.

The abuse continued for about another year and a half. Then one night at the rectory during his senior year, Burnette felt

that if he allowed Arimond to continue, he wouldn't survive. "I'd kill myself," he said. "I told him, 'No.'"

Burnette recognizes that voice he heard in his parent's basement was the same one that gave him the ability to say no. "It was quiet, not dramatic, but it was there," he said.

The teen stood up and went into the rectory living room, where he curled up naked behind a couch and wept. The next morning, he got dressed and left.

"The abuse ended there; James' relationship with the family did not," Burnette said. "I thought I could take it and set it aside and be done with it. Of course, that's not the case emotionally. And I couldn't tell anyone."

Like many victims, Burnette felt shame and embarrassment.

"I felt valueless and used," he said. "Since my parents were really close with him, I felt completely stuck – trapped."

'A skeleton of a person'

The first person he told about the abuse was his girlfriend and eventual fiancé. It gave Burnette, then in his early 20s, a level of relief to share his secret, but additional pain soon followed: Kendra was diagnosed with liver cancer and died five years later.

Knowing Kendra would want him to confront Arimond about his actions, he called the priest two months after her death. "I said what he did was wrong and that I didn't know him anymore," Burnette said.

Then he phoned his parents, who were supposed to go to dinner and a movie that night with Arimond.

"When I told them, there was no question they believed me," Burnette said. They were horrified.

“We were all really shocked and felt betrayed,” recalled Dreger, his sister. “We were so trusting.”

Arimond, who’d abused at least two other boys, was placed on administrative leave in 1990, although he kept a counseling license for years. By 2004, he’d been laicized.

Burnette temporarily was able to push aside the abuse and grief-caused turmoil to marry and become a father. When his second child was born, however, he could no longer suppress his deep psychological wounds. He began to withdraw emotionally and started to self-harm again. Burnette had never mourned the loss of his innocence or the death of his fiancé.

“My wife had married a boy, not a man,” he said. “Growth had been on pause because of grief.”

Once his third child arrived, “I was a skeleton of a person,” Burnette said. “I loved my kids but felt like I was headed toward a terrible life.”

“We could see that he was lost,” Dreger said. “He was still this kind and generous guy, but he was making decisions he wouldn’t normally make.”

Burnette and his wife did not want divorce and tried repeatedly to salvage the marriage. Nevertheless, divorce eventually came. “I met a wonderful person; I just was not who I was meant to be at the time,” Burnette said. “I have my kids, though, who are treasures.”

Finding home

Following the divorce, Burnette committed himself to healing. “I had to get better for my children,” he said. In therapy, he started to process the trauma from various stages in his life and to address an extreme lack of self-confidence. Day after day, he’d remind himself he was a bit better than he thought he was.



Burnette with his children.
Courtesy photo

During this period of intensive counseling, he attended a string of nondenominational and Christian communities. Most of his marriage, he'd gone through the motions of being Catholic. After the divorce, he wanted nothing to do with the Church.

"I never fully lost my love for God, but my faith was trampled and broken after seeing such darkness in the Church," he said. "For a good 10 years, I tried to find God in another way."

Although people were friendly at the various congregations, Burnette felt spiritually unfulfilled.

Meanwhile, he'd been pursuing a career in special education, assisting children with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges, and in 2008, he accepted a job in disability services at Catholic Charities for the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Though the nonprofit was located in the main administrative building for the diocese, and the presence of priests made him uncomfortable, he loved the work. Within five years, he was named director.

Then, at one of the nonprofit's staff meetings, there was a showing of a documentary on Catholicism. When a priest in the film spoke of divine love, Burnette was overcome with emotion.

“I was in the back of the room weeping like crazy,” he recalled. “It hit me so hard – having this sense of being in love with God. It was the beginning of me being called gently, fully back to him.”

Burnette attended a Catholic Charities retreat that included readings of the beatitudes. “It didn’t immerse you in the Faith but gave you pieces of it,” Burnette said. “It was what I needed.”

In 2012, he decided to try his neighborhood Catholic parish. Almost immediately, “things began getting better and easier,” he said.

Lent of 2014 was pivotal. “I felt how Jesus made that ultimate sacrifice for me, for you, for us,” Burnette said. “I could relate the cross to my own suffering and how I was shaped by those events. I looked at the cross and wept at the passion of Christ, and it brought – it brings – healing through all the emotions and the sadness.”

Even with therapy and hard work, “there is pain always there, and the memories are there,” he acknowledged. “Which is why there’s no way I could go through all this on my own; it had to be with God.”

With increasing enthusiasm, Burnette joined the parish choir and signed his children up for religious education. His youngest son, who had never been baptized, received the sacrament.

Once Burnette fully embraced the Faith, “I couldn’t get enough of it,” he said. “I had a hunger to learn more.”

The Eucharist and God’s gentle voice

Burnette’s work at Catholic Charities has flourished. He began an adult program serving those on the autism spectrum and people with developmental and physical disabilities, and he

founded a transitional living residence for individuals with mental health and substance abuse problems. The latter program won an award from the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Roberto Partarrieu, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse, said Burnette's suffering has given him an exceptional ability to tend to people's needs.

He sees how the agency's clients "have been abandoned or marginalized by society, a society that often puts them aside as 'those people,'" Partarrieu said. "He cares for them and accepts them."

Dreger added that her brother's struggles "have equipped him with a higher sense of hope, which he shares with those who have been rejected."



Burnette

Burnette said he feels called by God to assist victims of abuse like himself. He is attempting to publish a story he wrote, with a version for children and adults, about a caterpillar who overcomes trauma. Burnette thinks the book can be a catalyst for healing, and he has other such story ideas within him.

He understands that not all survivors of clergy abuse feel comfortable returning to the Catholic faith. But despite the sinful actions of Arimond and others in the Church, he feels

God has never abandoned him. "I know I can trust him," he said. "I believe that the way to truly be healed is to find a way closer to God, where there is hope."

Burnette said the Eucharist was one of the essential elements missing from the other faiths he tried.

"My week centers around the Church, and the Church is centered around the Eucharist," he said. "Everything we do, all our relationships, stem from Christ in the Eucharist. You can't get that anywhere else. For me, the Catholic Church is home."

Remaining within Burnette is the quiet voice that kept him from ingesting a handful of pills decades ago and eventually gave him the strength, even while crushed by abuse, to utter the transformative word "no."

"That has been the most important voice that has shown up throughout my life," Burnette said. He notices it now most clearly in prayer, but it is ever-present.

"It is compassion, it is love, it is caring," he said. "It is God here with me."

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