

The Story of Christopher Dixon:

Combined from the 3-part article by Phillip O'Connor

https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2004_07_12/2004_11_13_OConnor_SecretsSins.htm

<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/stories.nsf/stlouiscitycounty/story/0958D07B6CE7AD1286256F4B0062F52B>

Part 1:

Chris Dixon grew up about a mile from St. Thomas in Hannibal, where his parish priest took a special interest in the boy.

Dixon was the youngest of eight. His mother worked at the Motorola assembly plant just across the river in Quincy, Ill.

His father worked days as a printer. Three nights a week he played piano at a local dinner bar, where his wife would sometimes sit in and sing.

At what was then Hannibal Catholic School, Dixon served as an altar boy and played the organ at school Masses. From about the ages of 10 to 13, he said, he suffered sexual abuse by the parish priest, the Rev. John Fischer.

He hated what he said the priest did to him and knew it was wrong. But he also felt he could not say anything, because it would be his word against the priest whom everybody loved, even Dixon's own relatives. Every time the touching began, he shuddered. In 1976, then 13, Dixon entered St. Thomas, where he would escape Fischer only to be targeted for abuse by two more priests.

One night during a class retreat to the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, several students gathered to watch television in the Rev. Manus Daly's room, Dixon said.

Students recalled Daly, whom they nicknamed "Bear," as quick-tempered and subject to tantrums. More gregarious than O'Connell, he often used off-color language and wrestled and manhandled students.

Dixon said he fell asleep on the bed and awoke to find everyone gone but Daly, who he said crawled in beside him and tried to masturbate him.

In an interview, Dixon recalled the priest saying: "Do this to me."

"No. I can't," Dixon replied.

"Why not?"

"Because you're a priest. It's wrong."

Dixon then went back to his room.

Dixon said Daly later apologized and said it had never happened before and wouldn't again.

Later Dixon confided to O'Connell what both Fischer and Daly had done. By that time, O'Connell had become rector and principal of St. Thomas.

Now Dixon began long, late-night talks with O'Connell about being tempted by sex, Dixon's sexual experimentation with other students and the guilt he felt about his frequent masturbation.

Again, O'Connell turned the lengthy sessions into discussions of sexual fantasies.

At one point, O'Connell began to ask Dixon to type out in graphic detail what he was thinking while masturbating or during his homosexual encounters at St. Thomas.

Dixon now believes O'Connell's sole motive was to get him in bed.

And he did.

As part of his counseling, O'Connell said he wanted to show Dixon that people could be in bed together without having sex.

Dixon remembered O'Connell's ice-cold hand. He also remembered O'Connell made fun of him because he left his underwear on.

In bed, O'Connell began to hug and rub Dixon, Dixon said. The abuse happened three or four times during the next two years, he said.

O'Connell would whisper the same three words that Dixon said he heard from all his abusers: "I love you."

Part 2: Making an apology

In 1995, depressed, exhausted, racked by panic attacks and on the brink of suicide, Chris Dixon went to an old friend then serving as the Jefferson City Diocese's vicar general. He divulged that he'd been abused by three priests during his youth and that he might leave the priesthood.

Ordained in 1990, Dixon had spent three years as an associate pastor and part-time teacher at a Jefferson City parish and school before Bishop Michael McAuliffe assigned him to the faculty at St. Thomas, his alma mater. He went willingly, with the belief that things had to have changed since his time as a student.

Dixon's 21/2 years on the faculty there were difficult. By now, O'Connell had become bishop of Knoxville. But another of Dixon's alleged abusers, Manus Daly, had replaced O'Connell as rector of St. Thomas.

Dixon said Daly treated him as though he were still a student rather than an equal. An angry Dixon challenged Daly whenever he could.

At a faculty meeting, Dixon said he complained to Daly about Father McNally having students in his room long into the night.

He knew the abuse he had suffered under similar circumstances and he asked Daly to put a stop to it. Dixon said Daly did nothing.

Soon, Dixon began to suffer panic attacks. He struggled to get out of bed. He fell into a deep depression.

Dixon said his friend who served as vicar general told him to leave the seminary as soon as possible.

Just days after Dixon left St. Thomas, O'Connell wrote him a letter.

"If I could relive those days again, I would surely have recommended better help for you than what I was able to give," O'Connell wrote. "To the extent, Chris, that through my own misguided help or failure to respond in a way that would be more helpful for you, I am profoundly sorry and I abjectly apologize."

That wasn't good enough for Dixon.

He wanted O'Connell to acknowledge the sexual abuse, get help and resign as bishop.

In April 1996, Dixon wrote a letter to O'Connell.

"It is vitally important for my continued healing, as well as necessary for the sake of justice, that I know you are receiving help and doing what is appropriate to come to terms with your own blindness in terms of what you did and to make restitution," Dixon wrote. "I do not desire to take the matter any further as long as I know that you are dealing with this forthrightly and judiciously. If that is not the case with you, and for that matter, Manus, I will consider taking legal action that will force you to come to terms with what happened."

He told O'Connell to write him and let him know he was getting help.

"I know you and Bishop McAuliffe are good friends and that he has confronted you about this, yet he has no jurisdiction over you and cannot hold you accountable very well, I suspect," Dixon wrote in his letter.

O'Connell wrote back and told Dixon that he was in therapy "and will continue to do so as I strive for greater self-knowledge and insight."

Silent no more

It was an early evening in March 2002. For weeks, Chris Dixon had watched victims parade forward in Boston to tell the media how they were abused as children by priests. In the last few days, he had followed the front-page coverage as the scandal hit the St. Louis Archdiocese.

Now the 40-year-old sat alone in his bedroom in the Soulard neighborhood of St. Louis. The memories flooded back of the sexual abuse he had suffered as a child growing up in the Jefferson City Diocese.

Dixon stared at the computer screen. In his mind, the debate raged: Break my years-long silence or continue to hide the dirty secrets of a powerful Catholic bishop?

Six years before he'd taken money from the Jefferson City Diocese and agreed never to tell anyone about his accusations that O'Connell, Daly and Fischer had abused him.

Now, that decision left him conflicted.

He worried that there might be other victims afraid to come forward. Would going public force the church to confront the issue of sexual abuse in an open and honest way?

He feared what might happen should he break the confidentiality agreement. Would the church come after him?

What would his family say? He'd never told them of his abuse.

His fingers moved toward the keyboard.

He would no longer protect his abusers.

He had found his voice.

He began to type.

"I am finally finding the courage to come out into the open about this and the ways my life has been affected," he wrote in an e-mail to the Post-Dispatch. "I would like to tell my story."

Part 3:

On March 7, 2002, a group of 10 Roman Catholic bishops in Florida issued a statement that expressed their "abiding concern and compassion" for sex abuse victims of priests.

"It is both criminal and sinful," the statement read. "The people of God have a right to be able to trust those who minister to them in God's name."

The next day, one of those 10 -- Palm Beach Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell -- walked into a press conference flanked by more than two dozen fellow priests.

That morning, the Post-Dispatch had published a story in which a former priest, Chris Dixon, accused O'Connell and two other priests of abusing him years before, including when Dixon was a student at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Hannibal, Mo. The article also revealed that the church had paid Dixon \$125,000 in a confidential settlement.

"I am truly deeply sorry for the pain, hurt, anger and confusion I have caused," O'Connell said in announcing his resignation. "My heart bleeds for Chris Dixon."

O'Connell, who served on the faculty at St. Thomas for 25 years, described his actions with Dixon, whom he called a great friend, as a misguided attempt at counseling.

"I deeply regret anything that has happened to him," O'Connell said. "For those who will be angry, I certainly ask, when the time is right that they pray for my forgiveness."

He then added, "there could be one other person of a somewhat similar situation in a somewhat similar time frame who might come forward."

To whom O'Connell was referring may never be known. But at least two other former St. Thomas students were in contact with O'Connell over the next few days

Dixon, 42, no longer takes medication or suffers from the panic attacks and deep depression that took him to the brink of suicide. He has worked for the past five years at the Catholic Commission on Housing but is no longer a member of the church.

"I will never allow someone to have that kind of control over me," he said. "Someone asked me did this experience shake my faith. No. It shattered it. I have no faith anymore in institutional religion. The hypocrisy is daily."