

The rise and fall of Knoxville Bishop Richard Stika

A priest called the East Tennessee bishop's tenure a 'yearslong cloud of gaslighting.' Stika said he did his best.

Today at 6:53 p.m. | Updated July 8, 2023 at 8:30 p.m.

by **Andrew Schwartz**

Staff photo / Bishop Richard Stika, Bishop of Knoxville, speaks in 2020 during the first session of a tribunal to consider canonizing Patrick Ryan, a Catholic priest in Chattanooga in the late 19th century. Ryan died on Sept. 28, 1878, at age 33 while serving the sick in Chattanooga during an outbreak of yellow fever.

One June day in 2021, priests of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Knoxville convened in a Gatlinburg, Tennessee, hotel conference room. One of them, perceiving tension in the room, raised his hand.

"I've been on vacation for two weeks," the priest said.

"You're a lucky man," responded the bishop of Knoxville, Richard Stika.

"Can you explain to me," the priest asked, "what in the world is going on here?"

The room erupted in laughter. Stika took a go.

An activist had created a story that got bounced around the diocese, Stika said. Somebody, unhappy with the bishop's leadership, he said, had anonymously fed false information to a news website.

Friendships were questioned, Stika said, and reputations unjustly tarnished.

This was not exactly an objective account of the tumult of the previous weeks, a controversy that stemmed from the bishop's intervention in the investigation of a favored seminarian who'd been accused of harassment and rape.

Stika's response exemplified his tendencies to manipulate and obfuscate, priests said. These were habits, several said, that they came to know well — and ultimately, tried to sound the alarm about — during Stika's 14-year run as bishop, which ended when he resigned late last month.

This account of the end of Stika's tenure is based on interviews with ten priests, three hours of phone interviews with Stika, court filings, as well as documents and audio recordings obtained by the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

In the Gatlinburg hotel room, Stika pointed to those he said were injured in the media storm the activist and an anonymous clergyman, he claimed, had summoned. He listed church staff, the young seminarian and a priest in the diocese named Brent Shelton.

Shelton felt used.

He had been mortified by how a recent article framed his experience reporting a predatory Texas priest from his youth. But that media report was, in its substance, entirely unrelated to the bishop's recent actions.

As Stika spoke, Shelton was mortified again, to see his boss conflating the two stories.

"It was awful," Shelton said recently. "Bishop Stika turns everything around and makes it somehow support him."

Eventually the conversation moved on. Priests reflected on the young diocese's fraternal history. They were all linked, one told the rest, by a special bond, by things only they can understand about one another.

Stika joined in.

"We are a good presbyterate," he said. "And I say that as 'we' because I'm incarcerated just the same as you are in this diocese. We're brother priests. And God forbid we ever forget that."

ST. LOUIS

One late evening at the Church of the Annunziata in St. Louis, Missouri, around Christmas 2008, Stika got a call from the 202 area code of Washington, D.C. It was Pietro Sambini, the papal nuncio to the U.S.

Flu-stricken, Stika later awoke to suspect he'd dreamed the call up, he said. But then, he said, he saw a note he'd written on scratch paper — a reminder to write Pope Benedict XVI to accept his assignment as bishop of Knoxville.

Under the tutelage of three archbishops, including the well-connected Justin Rigali, Stika had taken on several difficult jobs in the St. Louis archdiocese. Yet he said the call from the nuncio was a surprise; a Type-1 diabetic with heart disease, he said he figured his longstanding personal health challenges were disqualifying.

In early 2009, Stika snuck into Tennessee for the news conference at which, donning a Vols hat, he presented himself to the small but growing Catholic community over which he would preside, stretching from Chattanooga to the easternmost portion of the state.

"Then on March 19," Stika recalled by phone recently, "I was ordained a bishop at the convention center in Knoxville, and I think 5,500 people attended."

photo (AP Photo/Plinio Lepri) / Cardinal Justin Rigali, left, center row, stands with other newly-elevated cardinals in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in 2003. Rigali plans to move with Bishop Richard Stika to St. Louis, now that Stika has resigned.

"ONE OF US"

The diocese of Knoxville was carved from the diocese of Nashville in 1988. After the departure in 1998 of the first bishop of Knoxville, Anthony O'Connell, the longtime East Tennessee priest Al Humbrecht administered the diocese until Joseph Kurtz was named the second bishop.

"I cannot tell you how many times he (Kurtz) called me during his first year that he was bishop, saying, 'Al, how do we do this here, how do we do that here?'" Humbrecht said. "He wanted to blend in with us and be one of us."

By contrast, several priests said, Stika seemed little interested in them or their perspectives, habitually referred to how things were done in St. Louis and found a way to make everything about himself.

Athens, Tennessee, priest John Orr likened Stika to a guy who always tells his current girlfriend about the things his last girlfriend was into. Shelton recalled how, reporting back on an early visit to a Catholic school, the bishop said, "Oh, they love me there. They love me there."

"Which is a very strange thing to say," Shelton said. "Normally you would say, 'Oh, they're a great school; I'm very impressed,' or whatever. You don't come away saying, 'Oh, they adore me there; they love me there.' He would speak that way all the time."

Stika said he tried not to just talk to the old guard. If he could do it again, he said he would keep quiet about being from St. Louis. But he was a product of his home, he said. He was chosen to bring his administrative experience to a growing diocese where he perceived several needs.

When he arrived, he said the first thing he did was step back and observe what was going on. There wasn't much of a communication office, he said. The priests were aging, he said, the finances shaky.

He said he improved security protocols for fundraised money, established an enduring diocese staff and actively encouraged young people to consider the priesthood. When an area Catholic hospital was sold, he said, he was proud to have used his position to channel \$13 million into an endowment that funds a free health clinic and other services.

When he was "on" out in public, Stika warmly engaged parishioners — he was friendly, spontaneous and funny, said Patrick Garrity, a longtime East Tennessee priest who often advised the bishop.

Yet, though some priests recalled tender moments, this charm was sometimes missing in one-on-one conversations. According to Garrity, Stika sometimes just wouldn't seem to hear others and never seemed comfortable with people in East Tennessee.

Stika said being a bishop is lonely. He had to sometimes remain distant because priests and others would get jealous if he seemed to pick favorites. He said he loves East Tennessee; he said he has a sign in his office that says "another day in paradise."

photo Staff photo by Matt Hamilton/ Monsignor Al Humbrecht stands at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Soddy-Daisy on Friday. Humbrecht has administered the diocese of Knoxville between bishops.

THE CATHEDRAL

When, early on, Stika proposed a \$45 million cathedral, priests tried to be polite.

"Well bishop," one priest said, according to Garrity, "this doesn't really reflect who we are in East Tennessee."

Stika agreed to whittle the project down to about \$25 million. The proposed wings would be deferred for later, and several priests said they were told parishes would not be taxed to fund it.

Then, priests said, they noticed little violations of trust. When the bishop proposed a series of parish visits — celebrating masses, getting to know the leadership — one priest, Peter Iorio, asked Stika to commit that he would not discuss the capital campaign for the cathedral; there was a lot of animosity toward the project at his Johnson City parish, and Iorio wanted to believe the bishop was coming for the reasons he'd stated.

Stika, Iorio said, confirmed he would not discuss the cathedral.

When the bishop arrived, he preached a nice homily, people were enjoying it. Then, Iorio said, Stika began to talk about the big project in Knoxville. Iorio recalled dropping his head.

"I knew, right then, I was the fool," he said, adding that a diocese official later apologized to him.

Construction began. Those wings said to be deferred for the future? They got erected with everything else. The \$25 million project became, depending on how one counts it, \$35 million, closer to \$40 million including items related to construction like the parking lots. Parishes around the diocese were assessed to service the debt.

Stika said that people will be proud of the cathedral in 100 years and that the wings are now always packed with people and that building them sooner saved money in the end. If this is true, several priests said, he never communicated it. Later, some started writing down what the bishop told them, to be a little more sure of their memory.

THE SEMINARIAN

In 2018 Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, Pope John Paul II's former secretary, came to Knoxville for the dedication of its new cathedral. On the trip, according to Stika, the Polish cardinal also visited a now-defunct Michigan seminary that trained Polish priests to serve in the U.S.

Previous candidates from SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary "weren't really stars," Stika said. But when Dziwisz connected him to a seminarian there, Stika said that, out of respect, he was willing to take another chance.

At the time the Knoxville diocese vocations director, Joseph Reed said working with that seminary had been a terrible experience that everyone agreed they would not repeat. He said he advised against bringing the new seminarian on. A big part of his job was to vet these potential priests, he said, and it was difficult to reliably assess this one's past.

"I didn't ask for his approval," Stika said, referring to Reed. "Because actually, the vocation director works for me."

Given past disappointments, Stika was determined to oversee this Polish seminarian's formation himself. The bishop soon moved him into the roughly million-dollar Knoxville residence he shared with Rigali, paid for by a nonprofit that donated to Catholic causes, Stika said.

Rigali had become a cardinal and archbishop of Philadelphia in 2003, but, according to media reports, he became engulfed in a sexual abuse scandal he was accused of mishandling. In retirement, Rigali moved to live in Knoxville with his friend, Stika. When, years later, the seminarian moved in to join them, Stika felt the cardinal could offer valuable assessment of the seminarian and, as a gifted linguist, offer English lessons.

Stika said the seminarian worked with the growing Polish Catholic community in town. He also drove Stika around the diocese, helping out with sacramental rituals, attending events. The seminarian accompanied Stika to meet with Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee. He accompanied Stika to the installation of the bishop of Birmingham.

"I would observe how he would interact with people," Stika said.

The seminarian was bright, spoke many languages and had an engaging personality, Stika said. Given the young man's intellectual streak, he seemed like a candidate to send for advanced degrees.

Reed wasn't so sure.

"In some ways," Reed said by phone recently, "it's like all of us are trying to come out of a yearslong cloud of gaslighting."

Sometimes seminarians drive bishops around, but Reed had never heard of a seminarian living with a bishop; he said he advised against it but the bishop would tell him that the seminarian was really helpful with the cardinal.

The seminarian's English, while obviously not native, was quite good from the beginning, Reed said. But his capacity with other languages didn't really stand out as exceptional given, Reed said, that many of the diocese's own priests are multilingual.

In mid-2019, Stika said, he and another official, David Boettner, investigated rumors about the Polish seminarian's relationship with a musician at the Knoxville cathedral. Stika said both men attested that they were not in a relationship.

Reed said Stika approached him and told him he looked into it and that nothing had happened.

"And I'm like, 'I don't even know what 'it' is,'" Reed recalled, adding that he didn't feel it was appropriate for Stika to conduct interviews in that inquiry.

"I felt almost like he wanted me to repeat, 'this is the decision, and this is where things stand,'" Reed recalled. "And I said, 'I simply do not feel that I have any more clarity now than I had before.'"

In the fall of 2019, the young Polish seminarian joined other Knoxville diocese priests-in-training at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in Indiana. His grades, Stika said, were stellar. Yet many priests remained disturbed by what looked like preferential treatment. The young seminarian, for example, at one point had a diocese credit card, a privilege not extended to his classmates.

Against Reed's recommendation, Stika — seeking, he said, a chance for the seminarian to rendezvous with his European family — pulled the seminarian out of class to fly with him to Italy and meet with the pope.

photo Staff Photo by Matt Hamilton / Cardinal Justin Rigali looks on during a ceremony in 2021 at Chattanooga's Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. Rigali lives in retirement with Bishop Richard Stika in Knoxville.

ON ALERT

After Shelton reported his old Texas priest for abuse decades ago, the priest was removed from the parish. But Shelton said diocesan leaders didn't publicly say why. In subsequent years, Shelton said he tried to learn the priest's whereabouts. But Texas Catholic officials sometimes wouldn't answer his calls, he said, and sometimes outright lied.

Given this experience, he said, he went on high alert when in March 2021, a Chattanooga-area priest called with disturbing news.

On Feb. 26, 2021, Stika had told clergy over email that the Polish seminarian had entered a two-year period of discernment and would be assisting him and the cardinal in the chancery. In fact, the priest told Shelton, the seminarian had been kicked out of school for sexual harassment.

Shelton said he searched the seminarian online and ended up on an unlisted page on a website run by Susan Vance, a parishioner of his and a well-known activist for the Tennessee chapter of SNAP — Survivors Network of those Abused By Priests.

Vance's document seemed to describe the account of the musician who'd worked at the Knoxville cathedral. It said that one time, the musician became intoxicated in the company of the seminarian — and awoke having been raped.

Shelton said he told Marla Lenihan, then the diocese's victim's assistance coordinator. But as weeks went by, he said, he heard Stika was resisting any investigation.

"HE WAS YOUNG"

Stika had received a letter from Saint Meinrad's president-rector. The school official alluded to a recent conversation he'd had with the bishop — and elaborated on the reasons he'd removed the Polish seminarian from his school.

Attached with the letter were three first-hand reports written by other seminarians. They varied in nature and content but collectively depicted a young man who made classmates deeply uncomfortable with unwanted touching and strange comments that seemed like not-so-oblique shows of sexual interest — and which sometimes persisted even after he was clearly rebuffed.

The school official wrote the presence on the internet of a story relating to the case of the seminarian and a cathedral musician was also part of the decision to dismiss him.

That online dossier Shelton and others found hadn't stopped at the rape allegation. It also included speculation about Stika and others abusing the Polish seminarian. Stika said he found it ludicrous. And he said the harassment allegations were not sufficiently concrete to justify dismissing the seminarian.

"He was young," Stika said of the seminarian. "He might have been trying to figure out who he was. Some of that is, you talk to your peers or you interact with your peers — then you get some feedback."

Stika said he planned to send him for evaluation and therapy, but what happened next foiled his plans. Iorio got wind of the allegations. The priest served on the diocesan board that made recommendations on sexual abuse cases and fitness for ministry. Stika said he saw the matter at hand as a problem between employees and didn't feel it was the board's remit.

A series of meetings followed. At one point, Iorio recalled, Stika pointed to him, livid, saying "you did this," and that the bishop threatened to leave his own post.

"It was like the 'Twilight Zone' or something," Iorio recalled. "Why are you getting so upset and threatening to resign yourself instead of just dismissing this man, sending him back home?"

The board appointed an investigator, but Stika quickly dismissed him; he said the investigator had arrived in the chancery without making his purpose clear and confused people there with his questions. Then the bishop said he tapped someone else to investigate, and the seminarian was interviewed.

"I thought, at least I'll get information from one side," Stika said. "But the other side — nobody actually came forward."

photo Staff Photo / As bishop-elect of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Knoxville in 2009, Monsignor Richard F. Stika, right, talks with the Rev. George Schmidt as he visits the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church on Eighth Street during his first visit to Chattanooga.

ECHOES OF TEXAS

lorio, who was present at many meetings to discuss the case, said that the investigation felt inadequate and that he and others on the committee responsible for making recommendations on sexual misconduct allegations felt shut down.

Shelton heard rumors from outside the committee. He said it was obvious the musician had gone to a victims' advocate when he didn't feel like he could go anywhere else. The failure, Shelton said, of the diocese to proactively reach out to the alleged rape victim or scrutinize the seminarian's past reminded him of his own experience, back in Texas, when, he said, no one contacted him, no one wanted to talk. He had to do all the work.

In mid-April, Shelton said, he made a report on the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. And soon after, seeking guidance, he said he and another priest spoke with Kurtz, then the archbishop of Louisville, over video chat. According to Shelton, his former bishop mentioned the complaint met the criteria of something called Vos Estis Lux Mundi, a procedure to report apparent sexual abuses and cover-ups Pope Francis implemented in 2019.

Soon after, on April 16, 2021, a young priest made one such formal complaint.

Rumors spread. Shelton and other priests started making calls, encouraging others to report red flags. In an April 19 email to Lenihan, the victims assistance coordinator, lorio said he was wondering whether it was time to get as many people as possible to make complaints.

"We members of the review board certainly have major concerns," he wrote.

A few days later, on April 23, 2021, the Catholic news site The Pillar, citing anonymous sources in the diocese, the Vatican and at the Indiana seminary, reported the Vatican had received multiple allegations of misconduct against Stika.

In a series of articles, The Pillar described broader misgivings clergy had toward Stika's leadership. The bishop would go on to dismiss the reporting as a young publication's cynical bid for readers, but some priests were struck by its accuracy.

Amid the media churn, other outlets published stories of their own about the diocese. One of these, Shelton felt, inaccurately made it seem like decades had transpired before he'd reported the priest who abused him as

a teen in Texas. Prior to the June 2021 priest meeting in Gatlinburg, Stika asked Shelton to relate this experience with the media to the other priests.

Stika said he thought Shelton would find telling his story to be cathartic. Shelton said he was wary the bishop would manipulate his words but did as asked.

Then the bishop offered his own commentary. Shelton's case, Stika said, was yet another cautionary tale of what happens when people go to the media: Victims look like villains. They lose control of the story.

TROPHIES

Looking back, Shelton has developed an analysis of his former bishop.

"He is what I now know to be a grandiose narcissist — someone who truly, for whatever reason, is only interested in himself and seems incapable of viewing other people as anything other than a means to an end," Shelton said.

Told about the assessment, Stika commented sardonically that he didn't know Shelton was a psychologist.

If he didn't care about people, Stika said, why did he spend so much time helping Shelton deal with his personal challenges after that news report came out?

Asked about Stika's apparent concern for the Polish seminarian — "My own priests destroyed his reputation without giving him a break," Stika told the Times Free Press — Shelton said narcissists cherish people who stroke their egos, who they see as trophies, a category he felt applied to the seminarian.

The Times Free Press is not naming the seminarian because his alleged misconduct did not result in criminal prosecution. Stika said he is out of touch with the seminarian, who has since changed his name.

Where, Shelton asked, was the bishop's concern for the man who claimed to have been raped? Or the other seminarians who claimed to have been harassed? Christian spiritual leaders are supposed to care not just for people who will stroke their egos, he said, but people who can't offer anything in return.

"This has never been about the seminarian," Shelton said. "It's been about the bishop's response to the allegations. If there had been an independent investigation and chance for the review board to render its decision, people would have been okay with it, one way or the other. I heard no one judge this seminarian. The judgment is on the bishop."

Weeks after the meeting in Gatlinburg, priests learned that Stika, Rigali and the seminarian had embarked on yet another road trip.

photo Staff Photo by Robin Rudd / The interior of the Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is seen in June. The wings of the structure were controversial, but departing Bishop Richard Stika says they are always packed.

CALLS FOR HELP

In late August 2021, several priests gathered in the social hall of Shelton's parish in Oak Ridge to pray and discuss the problem at hand. Some priests in the diocese were struggling with their pledge to be obedient to their bishop — a commitment, Stika often quipped during ordinations, of which he was particularly fond.

Shelton said working in the diocese now raised the issue of personal integrity. The nature of the Catholic priesthood is such that your identity as a priest is necessarily tied to the person of the bishop, he said. When a bishop shows character flaws, he said, it is hard to stand in front of a congregation and represent him.

In early September 2021, Shelton said Lenihan, the diocese's victim's assistance coordinator, called him and two other priests to a restaurant.

Lenihan died months later, but according to Shelton, she recommended they write a letter to the papal nuncio to detail the bishop's behavior prior to and since priests had made their individual reports in the spring.

Over email the coming weeks, a small group of priests drafted the letter together. The priests wrote they did not wish, in hindsight, to be accused of remaining silent. Had they done everything, they asked, that the faithful could expect?

"We make this appeal for merciful relief — in whatever form is judged possible and appropriate — from the sufferings we've endured these past 12 years," they wrote.

Shelton said 11 priests signed the letter, though more helped craft it. In late September 2021, he said, he filmed himself placing the letter in a freestanding mailbox in Oak Ridge.

FABRE ARRIVES

Many years ago, Shelton said, he told a Dallas representative of SNAP about his experience being abused within the church. As he related his own story, he said the person on the other line seemed to drop an F-bomb between every other word.

He recalls thinking the person seemed very unprofessional. But then he noticed what he was feeling: a sense of relief.

"This is the first person who reacted angrily at what I was telling them happened to me," Shelton said.

Victims of sexual violence, he said, walk around with their soul screaming everywhere they go, yet few can hear it — just other victims and advocates. Everyone just wants to be polite.

In early 2022, the former cathedral musician filed a lawsuit accusing Stika and the diocese of scuttling the investigation into his rape and intimidating him.

Stika said he had never heard about the rape allegation until the online dossier started floating around and maintains he acted reasonably given the information available at the time. The suit, however, did unearth new information that he felt cast some doubt on the Polish seminarian's story.

Stika cited a handwritten note pictured in the suit, dated just a few days after the rape allegedly occurred. "You are a wonderful man," the seminarian wrote to the musician, according to the suit. "I am so happy that I could meet you. Thank you for everything. And for what was wrong — I apologize with all my heart."

PROFOUND RELIEF

The year went on. More complaints surfaced in the press. Another suit accused the diocese of botching a completely different sexual assault investigation.

In September 2022, the priests got an interesting email from Stika. The previous week he'd been in Louisville, he wrote them, and decided to invite the new archbishop there, Shelton Fabre, to come to Knoxville to discuss priestly fraternity.

Dozens of priests gathered the next day at the cathedral. According to Humbrecht, Stika said something to those seated at his table about having to get some work done in the chancery, and then he left.

Then, Humbrecht recalled, the archbishop of Louisville addressed the priests, saying he wanted to know what he could do to make their life as priests better — and assuring them nothing in the room would go back to their bishop.

Priests spoke — some, Humbrecht said, he'd never heard raise issues about the bishop before. In the subsequent days and weeks, Humbrecht said, several priests continued to speak by phone with Fabre — who, given the general silence priests have experienced from the upper Catholic hierarchy, provided a profound relief, he said.

"We felt we were acknowledged as persons," Humbrecht said. "And that we had someone who really cared about what was going on with us."

(READ MORE: Chattanooga Catholics call for removal of Knoxville bishop, allege mishandling of sexual abuse claims, finances)

That fall, parishioners from Knoxville and Chattanooga sent letters of complaint to the papal nuncio, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Fabre. And several priests received letters summoning them to the Hilton Knoxville, where two Virginia bishops, aided by associates and a professional stenographer, would interview them as part of an apostolic visitation.

"Thank you," said a letter to one priest, "for your willingness to be interviewed and assist us in carrying out this directive of the Holy Father."

Priests said Stika could be vindictive and prone to retaliation. Shelton said that tendency was evident even in the bishop's final months on the job. In April of this year, Shelton said he got a call from Stika's secretary, booking a meeting a few days hence. There, Shelton said, the bishop notified him he was being assigned to pastor in a small mountain town.

Shelton had been a dean, worked in one of the bigger parishes with a school. Feeling the new assignment sent a clear sign, he decided to request a formal leave of absence, to begin after an already-planned trip.

He sent the bishop an email stating his reasons for the leave request — and departed on his trip, feeling he handled a delicate situation in a way that would not harm his parish or anyone else.

Soon after leaving, however, he learned Stika emailed his old Oak Ridge parish, St. Mary's, as well as diocese clergy.

Shelton, the bishop told them, had just left his parish posting without his knowledge or permission.

"My prayer is that Father Shelton will soon return to the diocese," Stika wrote. "I ask that you join me in those prayers."

RESIGNATION

On June 27, the Vatican's daily bulletin said that Pope Francis had accepted Stika's resignation. The church tapped Fabre, the Louisville archbishop, to oversee the diocese until a replacement was found.

In his own announcement that day, Stika noted a long history of health challenges — a 2009 diabetic coma, a heart bypass surgery, neuropathy. He also acknowledged the public criticism he has faced, which he said weighed on him physically and emotionally.

He said he would be returning to St. Louis with Rigali. Asked after his resignation about their relationship, Stika said they've lived together for more than two decades. The cardinal, he said, had given his life to the church, had met historical figures like Queen Elizabeth, Bono, Idi Amin. One Catholic magazine, Stika said, wrote that, of all the Americans who have ever worked at the Vatican, Rigali was the most powerful.

Stika's own father died when he was relatively young, and he said Rigali, now 88, is like his dad, his grandfather, his closest friend — and that they intend to stick together to the end.

TEXAS

Stika said he left the diocese stronger than he found it. To accompany the retirement announcement, the diocese posted a list of Stika's accomplishments. These included his fundraising totals, the Knoxville cathedral and the fact that Stika ordained 24 priests. Some priests noted that number paints an incomplete picture; one had to take into account clergy who'd left.

Shelton spoke with the Times Free Press from rural Texas, where he was staying with family, working at a restaurant. He has enrolled in an electrician apprenticeship program.

He said he's learned it's good to have an exit door. He still believes in Jesus, the Gospel. He believes in the Catholics of East Tennessee.

And he said he'd be eager to walk the path of reconciliation with the Catholic church but perceives little genuine interest from an institution that, in announcing Stika's resignation, failed to acknowledge anything had even gone wrong.

"They failed utterly," he said. "A bishop admitted he removed an investigator and remained the bishop for two years — and even then he just retired," Shelton said. "And he has a status of bishop emeritus of Knoxville. That is a total utter failure of the hierarchy to hear the screams of the victims."

Maybe Shelton will return to priestly duty; he told Stika in an April email he had given no thought to formally leaving the priesthood. But he said the days are gone when he will trust in the Catholic hierarchy, and he's not going to ask others to do so.

"I hope future generations can do it," he said. "I can't."

Contact Andrew Schwartz at aschwartz@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6431.