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# Painful memories

## Benoit Brisson remains bitter with church over its handling of his abuse by a priest

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Staff Writer

For Benoit Brisson, the case of a 35-year-old Ottawa-area man complaining of sexual abuse against a former Cornwall priest brings back painful memories.

Brisson, now 33, was himself sexually molested by a former Cornwall priest 16 years ago.

There are some striking similarities between the two cases, and the way the Roman Catholic church handled them.

Brisson says the church is still treating cases of sexual abuse by clergy the same way it did eight years after he went public.

"Nothing has changed. It's still being pushed under the carpet. The secrecy is still there," he said during an interview this weekend from his Cornwall home.

Unlike Brisson, the Ottawa area man was paid \$32,000 by the Alexandria-Cornwall Diocese after he accused a priest of sexually molesting him some 20 years ago.

But the victim says he was never offered any other support from the church. The church says otherwise.

Brisson tells a remarkably similar story.

"They never asked if I was doing okay, or if I needed any help. They didn't care about me — the victim."

In fact, when he first let the church know about the abuse, he says they no longer wanted him to sing in church.

"The victim is a burden," says Brisson, a musician and teacher. "Nothing's changed, except now they're giving them money. (The church) doesn't want to deal with the problem."

It was exactly eight years ago Jan. 6 when Brisson first broke the silence.

He and his wife Denyse were having marital problems. He requested a separation. She pressed for reasons and that's when he finally told her the truth.

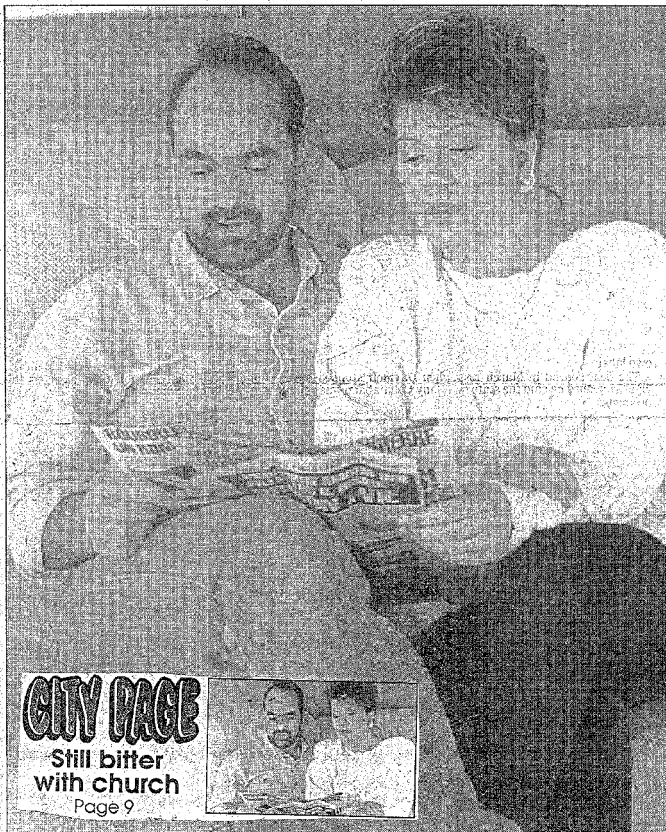
"Eight years ago we were living this and now we're reading about it," says Denyse, 33. "It's so similar it's scary."

The couple eventually reconciled several months after Benoit went public with his complaint. They have two daughters, ages five and eight.

Benoit says he complained to Bishop Eugene LaRocque about the abuse. The bishop promised him the priest would be removed from parish work and sent for treatment.

But not long after, friends said the priest working at a Hull parish.

That's when Benoit decided to go public and lay charges, saying he wanted to make sure the priest didn't abuse others.



**CITY PAGE**  
Still bitter with church  
Page 9

Benoit and Denyse Brisson say dealing with Benoit's memories of abuse by a priest saved their marriage

Rev. Gilles Deslauriers was eventually charged with 16 counts of sexually abusing nine young Cornwall men. He received two years probation and was ordered to receive counseling.

The Brisson's believe Deslauriers is currently at a parish ministry in St. Adele, Que.

It was the Brissons who requested the interview with the *Standard-Freeholder*.

Other newspapers have contacted them in the wake of the latest Cornwall controversy, but

they say they want their own community to know they're happy despite what they went through by unveiling the secret.

"They're hoping that perhaps it will give other victims the strength to share their secret."

"This is happening in our community and we think the people here should know what's going on," Denyse says, referring to the recent allegations of sexual abuse against a former local priest. That priest is now at a treatment centre in Toronto.

"We want people to see that we have a beautiful family, we're healthy, we love each other. Dealing with what happened really did something for us."

But it wasn't easy, they add. "Sure, my life at the time was ripped apart," explains Benoit, adding that after some counselling and family support he finally feels "strong".

"I knew people would probably judge me to death. But we said let's stop the secrets and just get on with it."

Benoit feels that the church, in this recent case, is again taking care of its own (the priest) and leaving the victim out in the cold.

"The church has to stop justifying the acts and condoning them," Benoit says. One of the things that has puzzled police and the church in this most recent case is that no other victims have come forward.

But after Brisson went public with the abuse, he also was the only victim to come forward on his own.

"Other victims wouldn't come out. There had to be one sacrificial lamb," Denyse says.

But Denyse and Benoit knew there were others. So they made lists of people who, like Benoit, had undergone one-on-one peer counselling with Deslauriers.

Together, they came up with a list of several potential victims.

"We showed the list to police and we were very, very close," Denyse says.

Police then went to those people and questioned them. The victims didn't make the first move.

"Their names were never mentioned. I had to make that deal with them," explains Benoit.

He says victims are reluctant to tell others about their abuse because they're afraid they won't be believed.

"That's the biggest fear, that you're not going to be believed."

There's also an incredible feeling of guilt for allowing the abuse to take place.

"When you're a victim of sexual abuse, you feel guilty. You say how could I have let that happen?" Benoit says.

"Some people might end up more alone by sharing the secret."

In Benoit's case, he had moral support from both his wife and family.

Eight years ago, former Cornwall Police Chief Claude Shaver was quoted in an Ottawa newspaper as criticizing LaRocque for being "less than cooperative" in the police investigation.

Ironically, last week Shaver said he was "furious" with the local church for making an out-of-court settlement with the victim, which led to police calling off the investigation.

Benoit says he doesn't expect the Ottawa man will come forward now, even though the diocese says the settlement didn't include a gag order preventing the man from pursuing a criminal investigation.

But he advises him to proceed with the laying of charges.

"He should lay charges for himself, and for others. The biggest part of the healing is facing it, and dealing with it."

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