

# Cambridge Chronicle

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## **An amazing journey of forgiveness**

By Richard Griffin  
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Cambridge — Michael Mack is a man of many credits as a writer and theatrical performer. Now age 55, he has also accomplished two things in the spiritual realm that rank as unique in my experience.

First, despite suffering sexual abuse as a boy at the hands of a Catholic priest, he is now an active member of the church and values its spirituality. All the other victims of clergy abuse I have known have distanced themselves from this faith community, most with continuing and understandable anger.

Michael's second achievement strikes me as even more remarkable. He has forgiven the priest who violated him.

In a long interview with Michael, I found his account of both events fascinating. The violation took place when he was 11 years old, the forgiveness when he had reached middle age.

Incidentally, the reason for our being in touch was a scheduled performance of Michael's one-person play "Conversations with My Molester – a Journey of Faith." It was to be staged at the playwright's parish, St. Paul's in Cambridge.

Just before sending this column off, I actually saw the play along with an unexpectedly large audience. We found it spellbinding. Adding to the meaning of the occasion, an official of the Archdiocese of Boston responsible for overseeing child protection, Barbara Thorp, was present and took part in the discussion at the end.

The sexual violation of the boy Michael took place in Brevard, North Carolina, a small town in the western part of the state. Because their mother was ill, he and his siblings spent a year living with their aunt and her family there, rather than back home in Washington D.C.

The boy loved his parish church in North Carolina and envisioned himself becoming a priest someday. He soon became close to the pastor, the person who took Michael to his first basketball game, and acted toward him like a "surrogate dad."

One day, the boy wandered into the church basement and sat down to play the piano. Then the priest appeared and invited Michael to come to the rectory. Once in this house, the priest brought the boy into a room, closed the door, and took advantage of the child's innocence.

Days later, the priest left the parish and Michael, too, moved from Brevard soon afterward. "I left that day confused," he recalls. "I felt that something big had just happened — something not right."

Later, as a teenager, he was to experience something much worse, what he calls "self-loathing."

As to the priest who assaulted him sexually, Michael lost complete contact with him for decades. But when he moved to Boston some 10 years ago, Michael made an astounding discovery.

The priest was also living in Massachusetts, not too far away in the orbit of Worcester. Though not defrocked, he was no longer performing priestly ministry.

Michael's repeated efforts to reach the priest were ultimately connected with a spiritual change in Michael's heart. He had been moved to forgive the priest for what he had done.

As I listened to Michael's story, I felt moved by his sincerity and his spiritual courage. He had managed to offer forgiveness to someone who, behind the full force of priestly status, had done him terrible harm.

Michael tells of going to the priest's funeral. It was his first time in many years back in a Catholic church. There the man who had violated him and others was extolled as a good priest. Despite his forgiveness, Michael found it bizarre to hear his molester praised.

However, Michael does suggest the spiritual complexity of it all. "Nothing is ever completely forgiven," he says. "I see it as a life-long journey."