

The Case of Father Joseph T. Hammond

Known Assignments

06/1931 – 09/1932	St. Mary, Mt. Pocono
09/1932 – 09/1935	St. Theresa, Wilkes-Barre
09/1935 – 09/1936	Asst. Director of Charities, Diocese of Scranton
06/1936 – 09/1937	St. Michael Industrial School, Tobyhanna
09/1937 – 12/1938	Director Diocesan Rural Life
12/1938 – 09/1943	Director of Catholic Hospitals, Diocese of Scranton
06/1943 – 09/1943	St. Mary Convent
09/1943 – 04/1946	Director of Catholic Charities
04/1946 – 06/1947	Blessed Sacrament, Miners Mills
06/1947 – 06/1950	St. Charles Borromeo, Sugar Notch
06/1950 – 09/1970	St. Leo, Ashley

Father Joseph T. Hammond was ordained on May 30, 1931. The Diocese of Scranton provided no records relevant to Hammond in its initial production of documents pursuant to a Grand Jury subpoena served on September 1, 2016. Through counsel, the Diocese explained that it did not have any records indicating that Hammond had engaged in any sexual misconduct with children. Hammond illustrates another type of case within the Dioceses of Pennsylvania: a case unknown to the modern Diocese of Scranton and an injustice only remembered by the victim.

Today Joe is 72 years old. On June 21, 2016, he testified before the Grand Jury and explained that in 1961, he was a high school student. His high school was affiliated with St. Leo the Great within the Diocese of Scranton. Hammond was a priest at that parish.

Hammond taught the boys to play cards and would invite them into the rectory. On one occasion, the boys were at the rectory playing cards and Joe went up to the room at Hammond's invitation. Joe explained,

I knocked on the door, knocked on the door and there was no one there. So I come back down and I said he's not there. They said, yeah, he's there, go up. So I went up there. I knocked on the door and he had opened the door. He was in the bed and he had himself covered. And he wanted me to come and sit on the edge of the bed with him. I'm thinking this is kind of odd. So I went over there and I sat on the edge of the bed. And he threw off the covers and he was naked and he was masturbating.

Joe was shocked. He explained his shock, stating, "He was right below God as far as I was concerned and I had a lot of respect for him."

Joe testified that Hammond attempted to molest him:

he tried to fondle me even though I had my clothes on. And then he says, I want you to take your pants off and get into bed with me. I said, no, I didn't think it was a good idea. So I says, I'll be right back.

Joe rushed back to his friends and reported what had occurred. At first, his friends refused to believe him. In fact, an older boy struck him for speaking ill of Hammond. Joe then asked the boys to accompany him. They went upstairs and peered into Hammond's room where they observed Hammond masturbating. When Hammond saw the boys, he invited them into his room. The children ran away.

Joe told the Grand Jury that he was panicked by what had happened. He called his girlfriend even though it was almost 3:00 A.M. His girlfriend ultimately became his wife and she also testified before the Grand Jury. She explained that her father would never let her speak with a boy at 3:00 A.M. but her father could tell that Joe was panicked and that something was very wrong. She advised Joe to get out of the rectory. Joe saw the keys to Hammond's large sedan and grabbed them and drove off in Hammond's car. He explained that he drove straight to the police station:

I went to the police station in that little town I lived in, Ashley, Pennsylvania. I thought, well, this guy will be able to steer us the right way. The guy who was on duty that night, his name was Chief McGowen. He was also a member of that Saint Leo's Church and he was the guy who would take up the collections on Sunday. When I went there and told him what had happened, I said I stole his car. I said, I have it out in the parking lot. He says, I don't want to know anything about this. I want you to leave, get out of here. I don't want the car here. I says, I can't take the car. I said, I want you to arrest me because I don't have a driver's license. He says, well, I just want you to get out of here, get rid of the car. I don't care what you do

with it. So we went and I dropped my friends off at their homes. And I went to my home and woke up my parents and told them what happened.

Joe's mother contacted the Diocese the next day. She wanted Bishop Jerome D. Hannan to be aware of Hammond's criminal conduct. The Diocesan leadership advised that they would look into the matter and take action. Joe specifically recalled that his mother received the assurances of the Chancery that the bishop had been informed and the matter would be addressed. The following day, members of the Diocese retrieved Hammond's sedan from the front yard of Joe's home.

According to Diocesan records, no action was taken against Hammond and he continued in ministry until his death in 1985. A review of Hammond's Diocesan file revealed that there was no record of the complaint made by Joe's mother.

Over the years, Joe made numerous efforts to find someone who cared about his experience. His wife testified that the experience completely changed Joe as a person. It made him angry and less trusting. In spite of Joe's anger at Hammond's conduct and the Diocese's inaction, Joe and his wife went on to have a happy life together. They grew their family and their children went on to have successful careers but Joe never forgot what Hammond tried to do and what the Diocese failed to do. That desire to see the matter pursued, even 55 years later, led Joe to contact the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General in 2016.

While Joe is now a Methodist, he did not leave the Catholic Church willingly. Joe explained the impact that Hammond had on his faith:

He definitely did because I didn't want to be any part of that Catholic faith anymore, especially since we were trying to report what happened to his supervisor or boss like you would in a workplace. If someone does something bad, you report it to the boss and something happens. But this wasn't happening. When my parents got involved and the other parents got involved, I'm thinking now something is going

to happen. It was just totally ignored. I had lost my faith basically because I didn't believe in all that stuff I was growing up with.

The Grand Jury was able to corroborate Joe's account through one of the boys who was with him that evening, as well as through the testimony of his wife. It should be noted that when the Grand Jury served a subpoena on the Ashley Police Department for records of the report, we were informed that no records existed. From a review of Hammond's assignments, the Grand Jury learned that he was assigned to St. Leo's in 1961.

A careful examination of Hammond's Diocesan records revealed Hammond's request to be incardinated into the Diocese of Scranton in 1931; letters which documented his role in advising Bishop William Hafey in Governor's Day celebrations in 1944; a proclamation which granted Hammond the title and honor "Monsignor" in 1968; and the approval letters of various Bishops granting Hammond permission for various cruises and trips to the West Indies, the Holy Land, Mexico, New Orleans, the Mediterranean, Canada, and the Caribbean. Buried within these documents, investigators located a small newspaper clipping. It was from the September 7, 1970 edition of the Wilkes-Barre Record. The article was entitled "Forced to Retire, Msgr. Hammond Says" and stated:

Msgr. Joseph T. Hammond, who will become pastor-emeritus of St. Leo's church, Ashley, this week, yesterday announced he did not retire as pastor of the church, but that he had been retired. He also stated he was in good health.

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9/7/70
W. H. Hammond

The Newspaper Clipping

The Grand Jury found Joe's testimony to be credible and this case demonstrative of the lasting effect of child sexual abuse. Joe sought justice at 72 years of age and the Grand Jury was able to corroborate that testimony despite the passage of time. While Hammond may be dead, the impact of his actions live on. This is a sobering reminder that although over 500,000 records were admitted into evidence before the Grand Jury, there are still crimes that could only be discovered through the voices of the victims.