

One of the Catholic Church's most prolific criminals had help from bishops. Earl Bierman sowed shame, suicide and murder. This is the story of the first-ever class-action lawsuit against a Roman Catholic diocese in the United States.

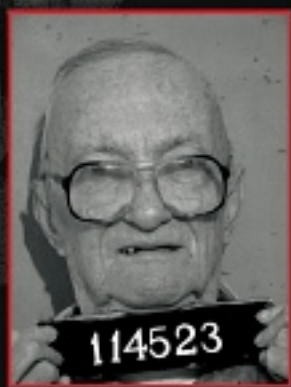
Priest, Beast: The Desolation of Father Earl Bierman

By Chris Russell

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A story of faith and horror

PRIEST, BEAST

THE DESOLATION OF FATHER EARL BIERMAN

GREGORY FLANNERY

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Chapter 2: “Different Way of Teaching”

Father Earl Bierman used to tell people that, in 30 years of teaching, he only threw one student out of class — me. He was angry after we’d argued in religion class about the Vietnam War, which was raging at the time. He was vehement in his hatred of communism. I had a precocious interest in news and an obnoxious willingness to voice my opinion as an 11-year-old. As I later learned, Bierman also considered me an impediment in the grooming of his next victim, who would become my best friend at the school.

Covington Latin School was an elite college-prep academy in inner-city Covington, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. The elitism lay not in its building, which was nondescript; nor in its campus, which included only the school, a parking lot and a one-room outbuilding. Nearly all of the students, not including me, were the children of upper-middle class professionals. Elitism is a mental construct, and we were taught that we were being trained to be leaders. Father Bierman boasted that Latin School didn’t teach typing. After all, he said, we wouldn’t need to type. “You’ll have secretaries for that,” he said.

He derided the recently established Northern Kentucky State College. “They teach basket-weaving there,” he said. “You should aim higher.” It was a given that all Latin School graduates would finish college and become “leaders.” We graduated wearing tuxedos — caps and gowns were for lesser schools — and not in the school auditorium but in the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption.

Built between 1894 and 1915 in the 13th Century French-Gothic style, the cathedral's facade is an exact replica of Notre Dame and reportedly contains the world's largest handmade stained-glass window.

In 1970, when I was a freshman, Bierman taught psychology, health and religion classes at Covington Latin School. He was also the guidance counselor.

Bierman was the fun priest in a school with a regimented environment. In the face of its strict dress code, he eschewed the traditional priest's black clerical shirt for pastel clerical shirts. He drove the rickety Latin School bus – we often had to push it by hand to make it start – to our rickety basketball team's games. He once told us he had spoken to a group of women.

"When I finished," he said, "they gave me the clap."

His juvenile humor made him seem harmless. No one called him Father Bierman or even Father Earl. We called him Earl, at his direction. He was one of the boys. He would arrange for feature films in the school auditorium. We had a showing of *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, which captured some of the spirit of our own scholastic culture. He sometimes took certain students to the Madison, a theater in downtown Covington.

Bierman used to go to the Army surplus store in Covington to buy five-pound tins of hard candy. He brought the candy to class and went round the room, offering some to each student, saying, "Here's something socially acceptable for you to suck on."

What adolescent boy wouldn't find that funny?

"When I thought of Earl Bierman, I thought of him as being a good recruiter for Latin School," said John Sector. "I thought of him as being, again, someone who got this good

senior retreat, someone who certainly taught in a different way."

Secter was one of Bierman's many victims. He wasn't the only one who had fond memories of the priest who abused him. So did David Lorenz, who later described his experiences in written testimony to a Maryland legislative committee.

"When I was almost 11 years old and nearing the end of my 6th grade at a grade school in Northern Kentucky, I was recruited to attend a college prep school by a priest, Earl Bierman, who was one of the most charismatic and likable priests that I had ever met in my young life," Lorenz said. "He was respected by all of the kids and respected by all of the parents. Over the course of the next few years, this priest who was the guidance counselor at the school, became friend and confidant to almost every student in this all-male school."

Bierman was a frequent contributor to the *Kentucky Post*, sending photos of Latin School students who were National Merit Scholarship finalists, winners at debate tournaments and volunteers for good causes. He sent photocopies of the resulting news articles to students, faculty, alumni and potential donors. He was responsible for attracting the first Latin School students from nearby Ohio and recruited at least one-fourth of the student body, which never totaled 400 in all its history.

Earl Bierman was made to influence other people. Exceptionally energetic, possessed of a quick mind, he had an uncanny ability to charm those he had just met. A few days later a handwritten letter would follow, or even an unannounced visit, carrying some thoughtful compliment or, in special cases, an unexpected act of generosity. The

cumulative effect was a kind of pleasant exasperation, as though a chill breeze had suddenly passed by on a steaming August afternoon. It's only afterward that the mind reminds, "Something's not right."

Even in his 50s he had a mania for sweets. Hot fudge cake, vanilla Cokes and ice cream featured in many accounts of his extracurricular visits with students. He was in the habit of delivering, without warning, bags of used clothing, probably gotten from a better-off family at whose house he had just appeared and stayed for dinner. Perhaps the goodwill offering was meant to encourage him to move along.

The mien of eccentric uncle belied a well-trained intellect that dazzled students by virtue of both its breadth and its manner of expression. At the same time he had an instinctive mechanical knack, so that when he was driving the school bus – for which he had single-handedly raised the money — and it broke down or wouldn't start, as was often the case, he would throw open the hood and start tinkering until the engine kicked on and the busload of students were back on the road to a basketball game or movie or prayer meeting.

The ride, whether in the bus or his car, was always a madcap episode. Bierman loved to talk, and he insisted on looking the other person in the eye at all times, whether he was holding forth in a living room or at the wheel of a moving car. One never doubted that he had Bierman's attention; the wonder was that he could get from one place to another without running straight off the road. As he unburdened himself of brilliant analyses of ecclesiastical history or the maintenance history of his father's 1957

Chevy, all his passengers could think of was the road and the traffic and the fact that he seemed to be ignoring them both.

His wardrobe was equally hectic. When he was sitting, his pants leg would rise to reveal a bit of priestly skin, and white socks beneath his black pants. He showed up in class wearing turtlenecks under his clerical shirt, and the clerical shirt itself might well be yellow or blue or some other Protestant-minister color. He not only worshipped at the feet of Vatican II, he advanced its fashion sense.

His liturgical style followed suit. This was in the early 1970s, when priests suddenly realized they ought to have such a thing as a liturgical style. Bierman seemed to think priests also should have a metaphysical style. After we graduated from Latin School, Bierman took my best friend, Jerry Junker, and me to meet Patricia Mischell, a psychic. She told me the reason I was afraid to be in a church at night was because, in a previous lifetime, I had been murdered in a church by a priest. I immediately thought of Bierman, who was sitting right next to me. I had never told anyone I was afraid to be in a church at night, but I was.

But even in the atmosphere of experimentation that was then underway in much of the Catholic Church, Bierman's tinkering with the sacraments was blatantly heterodox. He went far beyond such innovations as guitar masses and sitting in a circle during Mass. He gave group absolution, without requiring individual confession. He ad-libbed ancient liturgical prayers. He used homemade bread for the Eucharist. He had students gather around the altar during Mass.

Even if Bierman were not guilty of unspeakable crimes against dozens of children, his flair and his anti-traditional ministerial bent made conflict with Bishop Henry Ackerman

inevitable. Ackerman was an unrepentant foe of celebrating the Mass in English, nuns revealing wisps of hair beneath their now shorter veils, the sacrament of confession – renamed the Sacrament of Reconciliation – being celebrated without concealing the sinner’s face and all the other reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

As late as 1974, nine years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, at our graduation from Covington Latin School, we had to kneel one by one before the bishop and kiss his ring before receiving our diplomas. When he entered the cathedral, we sang, “Salve, reverendissime pater ... salve sacerdos magne!” (“Hail, most reverend father ... hail, great priest!”).

That great priest fought with all his holy might to slow changes in the church, and did nothing to stop Earl Bierman’s monstrous offenses.

Chapter 15: “Earl Was Frantic”

Fifteen years after Bierman’s conviction, three years after his death in prison, some victims were still suffering in silence, still trying to overcome the shame they had borne for decades.

A woman wrote me in 2008. Her parents were nearing divorce after 25 years of marriage. Her father was wrestling with his sexual identity, and she laid the blame at the feet of Earl Bierman. Her father graduated from Covington Latin School two years before me.

“Similar things were going on while my father was in school at Covington Latin. ... I know that experiences such as these are traumatic and hinder someone emotionally as well as in other ways, especially when they are never talked about or help is never sought out.”

When her father was a boy, Bierman accosted him multiple times, according to the woman.

“One time while dropping him off to something for school while in the car,” she wrote. “He told me that it was not just Bierman committing these horrible crimes against children. There (were) others at the school who were involved and took advantage of the students. I am sure there is more behind all of this, but he doesn't like to talk about it.”

Another reader wrote about her brother-in-law.

“I am not supposed to know about my brother-in-law's ‘secret,’” she wrote. “My sister has told me he would divorce her if she told anyone and that includes his own

family members. I can say for sure that my sister said you are a classmate of my brother-in-law. I said, 'Is the journalist who wrote those articles for the Cincinnati newspaper a classmate?' Yes, she said. ... It looks like you were in my brother-in-law's class at Covington Latin. He also was in the Charismatic group you mentioned. My brother-in-law is getting help. He has been in counseling for almost 15 years."

Even at that late date, a certain naivete attended the woman's thinking.

"I am certain I was shielded from the things you were exposed to in high school and seminary because I was a girl/woman and nuns have not done this yet (at least it hasn't been exposed)," her letter said. "I believe most women are nurturers and would not perpetrate such evil on their female students in Catholic school or in the novitiate."

To be fair, sexual assault by Catholic nuns had not as yet been widely reported. Though the insurances seem fewer in number than assaults by priests, brothers and deacons, the crime has occurred in convents and all-girl schools taught by nuns. And priests have been charged with sexually assaulting girls.

It is important to remember the sexual culture of the Catholic Church and the larger American society a half-century ago. In the early 1970s sex education in schools was a new and controversial concept. When the phrase "Sex Education" appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, the librarian at my Catholic grade school removed the cover and the article so children would not be exposed to it.

Television carried no commercials for feminine-hygiene products, treatments for erectile dysfunction, sexual lubricants or contraceptives. Sex was not a subject for polite conversation, and certainly not a matter to be discussed

with children. When I was 10, I saw the word “rape” in the newspaper. When I asked what the word meant, my father said, “You’ll find out when you’re older.” I looked in the dictionary and found a definition I did not understand.

While children were regularly warned not to get into cars with or accept gifts from strangers, the risks were seldom spelled out. While I was riding a city bus home one night when I was 12, a man asked where my stop was. He got off the bus with me and asked if I wanted to “go to the bathroom” with him. I didn’t understand and said my father was about to pick me up.

When my father arrived, I told him what the man had said. He drove to a pay phone and called the police. The officer who showed up said, “It sounds like some kind of queer.” Neither the cop nor my father bothered to explain what that meant.

Consider then the case of a 13-year-old boy in inner-city Covington approached by a gregarious priest who takes an interest in him and his impoverished family. The boy’s father has abandoned his wife and children. He has no awareness of sex beyond what the priest tells and does to him.

Richard Strunck was not like Earl Bierman’s other victims. He did not attend a Catholic school -- he wasn’t Catholic. He didn’t come from a middle-class or upper-middle class family. He wasn’t a gifted student. He wasn’t physically attractive; he often talks about being embarrassed by the size of his ears when he was a kid. But he was easy prey for Bierman, and became a virtual prisoner over the next three years. And longer. After the sex ended, the domination continued.

For Junker and others, “Earl’s World” was a comparatively non-violent state -- full of psychological

manipulation and sexual exploitation but void of extortion or threat of physical injury. It was different for Strunck.

There were multiple instances of Bierman slapping him, forcing him to have sex and threatening him with death if he told anyone. It began on the “wedding night.”

“After it was over we clothed and he said, ‘You can’t tell anyone about this. If you do, I’ll have to kill you and then kill myself. I’ll take care of you, but don’t tell anyone. You wanted this to happen as much as I did or you wouldn’t have done it.’”

Then, after driving the boy home, the priest talked to his mother about enrolling him in a catechism class.

Strunck said Bierman threatened three times over the course of 15 years to kill him in a murder-suicide.

After Strunck moved out of the rectory at St. John Church and into a dorm at Northern Kentucky University, Bierman stalked him, badgering him by telephone. One day Bierman called him in a panic. A Latin School graduate, a friend of Strunck’s through the catechism class, was causing trouble.

“(He said) Virgil Collins (a pseudonym) has gone to the bishop and told him that I molested him, and he told the bishop that he believes you, too, have been abused. The bishop wants to see you, Richie. ... You’ve got to go to the bishop and tell him it never happened. If you tell him, it would be my career, and I wouldn’t be able to help you and your family. I would have to kill you and then myself if the bishop knows about this.”

On the day of the meeting with Bishop Hughes, Bierman repeatedly called Strunck, coaching him.

“Earl was frantic and kept calling me at the dorm. He kept telling me what to say: ‘Tell them how much good I’ve

done at St. John's.' I responded, 'OK, I will.' Then I'd hang up, and less than two minutes later he'd call back. 'Try to make Virgil look bad. Do you know what he told me about you? He told me that he doesn't like you very much. He says you drive him crazy.' My initial response was to be angry at Virgil."

The reaction is reminiscent of Junker's and Richter's anger at Dennis Scanlon for reporting abuse by Bierman. The victim who spoke out was the enemy in Earl's World. And like Doll, Junker and Richter, Strunck lied to protect the priest who had molested him.

This is not an uncommon occurrence among victims of abuse. For example, women have often reported to emergency rooms with injuries inflicted by spouses or boyfriends and denied that any abuse had occurred. Their injuries are often reported as the result of falling.

Strunck, confronted -- for this was not an intervention he had sought -- with questions about his abuse, denied it had occurred at all.

"Bishop Hughes started talking. 'There was a gentleman who came and saw me last week and said he believes you are being sexually abused by Father Earl Bierman. Is this true, Richard?' My response was 'no.' He continued. 'If this is so, tell me now. We can help you and Father Bierman out.' My response again was, 'Nothing has happened.' He thanked me and let me go."

Strunck's denial became an issue two years later when, at age 20, he tried to kill himself by overdosing on pills. In the hospital, he told a psychologist about Bierman. The psychologist referred him to an attorney. Ken Easterling, Strunck's roommate, urged him to tell police. Years later, in

jail, Bierman accused Easterling, by now the Kenton County prosecutor, of being involved in a conspiracy against him.

“The following week I got a call from the bishop’s office,” Strunck said. “Some allegations had been brought against Earl and they needed to talk to me. Kenny told me, ‘I think you need to tell them what Earl has done to you.’ I was scared but realized I had to tell them.”

Joining the bishop were Msgr. Donald Hellman, chancellor of the diocese; Msgr. Thomas Sacksteder and Rev. Robert Wehage. Strunck, now 20, told the clerics that he had known Bierman for eight years, and the priest had repeatedly molested him.

“I told them, ‘In numerous places, too many to count.’ Father Hellman asked me, ‘A couple of years ago the bishop called you to his office and you told him you had not been molested. Why?’ I explained. ‘Father Bierman has told me that, if I did tell someone, he would kill me. I feared for my life.’”

It wasn’t just the threat of death that Bierman used to cow Strunck. After ending the sexual relationship, if it can be called that, Strunck moved and refused to let Bierman know where. The priest tracked him to London, Ky., where he had reconnected with his biological father. One day Strunck went to pay his water and electricity bills, only to learn that someone had already paid them: Father Earl Bierman.

Soon Bierman convinced Strunck to let him invest in a small AM radio station that he operated. Strunck’s father had invested his shares in a small grocery store to support the station. After a while, Bierman began pressuring Strunck to resume their sexual activity. Strunck threatened to leave.

“He said, ‘Fine. Go ahead. I’ll pull out of this and your father will lose his business, everything.’”

Michael Burnsman and others have commented critically on the gifts that Bierman lavished on Strunck over the years. By Strunck's accounting, these included a car, a savings account, a trailer, money for his radio station, clothing, trips to Albuquerque and San Francisco and cash. When Bierman was facing sentencing in 1993, Strunck gave a victim's impact statement to the court. Clayton Shea, the priest's attorney, hammered Strunck, suggesting the gifts had totaled \$100,000. The judge cut off the line of questioning. Bierman had already pled guilty. Left unanswered is how a teenage boy would go about refusing unsolicited gifts from a priest.

Years after the sexual abuse had ended, Strunck still found himself dealing with the aftermath -- and dealing with Bierman, who continued to pressure him.

"In early October of 1992, I was up late and received a phone call from Earl. He was frantic. 'You need to come up here tomorrow. I'm finished as a priest.'"

Strunck drove to Northern Kentucky to meet Bierman at a restaurant.

"He pulled out a copy of the *Mt. Washington Press*, a small weekly newspaper. 'Look at what Greg Flannery is saying about me. He mentions in this article that I may have molested hundreds of boys while I've been a priest. It's just terrible. ... Look, Jerry Junker admits I molested him and that's why he left the priesthood.'"

Strunck was not an exceptional student, but he was not without street smarts. He once arranged for Easterling to listen outside an open window while he got Bierman to talk about having sex with boys. At his attorney's direction, he began recording Bierman's phone calls to the radio station.

“Earl kept calling and talking to me,” Strunck said. “He did not know that I had spoken to the state police. One night he called me on the phone and started rambling on. ‘I’ve taken a whole bottle of Valium and I’m on Monmouth Street in Newport. I’m calling you with quarters. I’ve been advised not to talk to you, so I can’t call you on my phone from the Catholic Center. Listen. Do you know where I can find a gun here on Monmouth Street, here in Newport? ... I’m going to buy a gun, kill Greg Flannery, then kill myself.’ Fear shot through me. He might not just kill Flannery and himself, but also me.”

Much has been made of Bierman’s predation of students in Catholic schools, but little has been said about the role that the Children of God prayer group played in his criminal history.

It is remarkable that C.O.G. received so little attention - none, in fact -- from church authorities. A priest long known to have sexually abused adolescents and long known to have taught heterodoxy was openly leading a group of adolescent Catholics in weekly prayer meetings, on church grounds.

The group first met in the small chapel at Covington Latin School in 1974, then grew as Catholic high-school girls joined. Prayer meetings moved to Holy Cross School in Latonia, then to Our Lady of Presentation Church in Cincinnati. No priest or bishop is known to have asked what Bierman was up to, even though C.O.G. involved Catholic children in two dioceses. Although he had already acquired a long history of sexual abuse in schools, where there was some supervision, incompetent or complicit though it was, Bierman had free reign with the adolescents of C.O.G., with no other adults around.

What could be more wholesome, less harmful, than teenagers gathering on Saturday nights with a Catholic priest to pray and sing, pour out their hearts and hug one another? At least we weren't drinking or using drugs.

C.O.G. never numbered more than 30 active members at any given time, about half of them girls or young women. Of the 15 boys, at least seven -- or roughly half -- had been assaulted by Bierman. Junker and Richter had found it necessary to quash reports about Bierman's misconduct in C.O.G., something Junker later repented of. Strunck said the prayer group was rife with victims.

"My involvement in C.O.G. continued," he said. "I began to hear stories from others who also had fallen victim to Earl. I was scared to share what had happened with my involvement with him."

On a retreat, four people in C.O.G. told Strunck that Bierman had molested them.

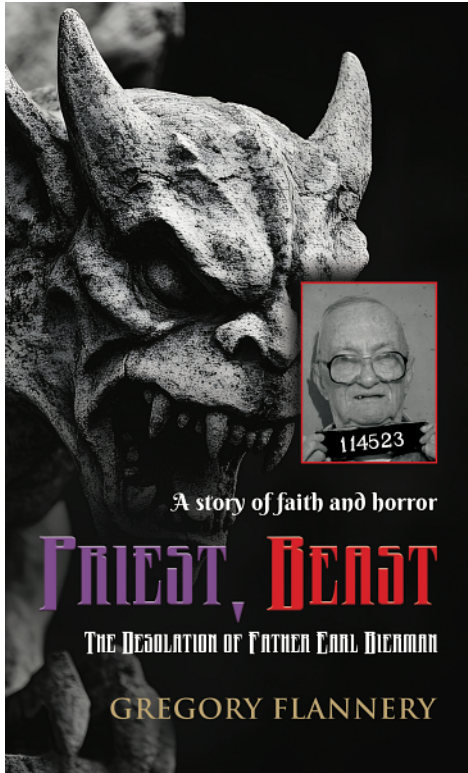
"One day he came by the house and I confronted him with what I had heard. He flatly denied it. (He said,) 'They want to take over control of C.O.G.'"

Strunck said that, not long after, he agreed to spend the night with Bierman, who promised not to touch him. But as he slept on a couch, he awoke to find Bierman performing oral sex on him. When Strunck ordered him to stop, Bierman played for pity.

"He said, 'Don't you feel bad about doing this to me? I've given you and your family so much.' It was his ability to make me feel guilty again. I complied with his wishes."

It was not only Earl Bierman and the small Diocese of Covington, Kentucky, of course. The epidemic of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church had also infected the larger Archdiocese of Cincinnati, across the Ohio River. This is not

in itself surprising, but is notable because Cincinnati was headed by two of the most prominent bishops in the United States. Reports of clerical abuse there broke into the open at the same time that it was engulfing Covington.



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