

The missionary Omer V. was thrown out of Congo for pedophilia, and then he founded a school in Rwanda.

‘I told God that I was sorry. What else should I do?’

Hundreds of thousands of Rwandese children were orphaned seventeen years ago. Then a Belgian priest came to Kigali to build them a school. What the Rwandese did not know is that Omer V. was sent away during his last mission in Congo due to pedophilia, and that the diocese of Ghent gave one of his victims 25,000 dollars to pay for therapy. By Douglas De Coninck..

Unlike today, in 2002, the Flemish Church was not so aware of what a tape recorder can accomplish. The recording is of a telephone conversation between Congolese Benjamin K. and the Flemish pastor Omer V. The two men met in 1980 in a small seminary in Kanzenze, a small town near Kolwezi in the former Zaire. Benjamin K. was thirteen at the time, pastor V. was in his forties and a teacher of the seminary. In 1982 he became the director of the African priest school, and Benjamin was his favorite student.

During the telephone conversation the pastor is at home, in East-Flemish Saint-Laureins, where he lives half of the time. K. is on the other side of the world. He emigrated to the U.S. in the nineties, and is a nurse in a Saint-Louis hospital. Sometimes they speak informally, sometimes formally. K. says that he feels guilty, although rationally he knows that he is not the one that should be feeling that way.

“You should not blame yourself”, says the pastor paternally. “You do not owe me anything. I should be the one that is sorry, and I am. I have to – and I have – cleared my conscience (...). There is forgiveness from the Church, and forgiveness from Jesus.”

Benjamin said that he has had a burning question on his mind for the past twenty years. At the time, he says, there were two other boys in the small Kanzenze seminary that told him that they underwent the same thing as him. The Congolese boy was raped by sodomy, and forced to perform oral sex. “They told me that you touched them as well, and that you masturbated”, he says. “I am asking you if you admit to that.”

The pastor: “Listen Benjamin, I have settled my past with those involved. I am asking you to talk to me about the problem that you have with yourself. I am responsible for my past. I am in no way denying my past. I do not really understand. If I make a mistake that involves someone else and I ask him for forgiveness, and he says: ‘I accept your apology and I forgive you’...such as I have done, for example, in confession. I told God that I am sorry. What else should I do?”

K. had kept silent for twenty years. He never had any good reason to speak out. In 1987, a Zairian pastor caught pastor V abusing a boy. He was sent back to Belgium by the bishop of Kolwezi. Everything became public; it was a scandal in the town. K.’s parents were told that their son was a homosexual, a pervert, and that he seduced Mr. Pastor into committing sins. The young Benjamin was repudiated. His father said: “You are no longer my son.”

Omer V. introduced him to the heavily religious Italian monastic order *Comunità Jesus Caritas*, so that he could continue his priest training in Italy from 1988 onwards. His parents and his nine brothers and sisters never saw K. again. “We have been in touch for the last few years”, Benjamin K. tells us over the phone from the U.S. “We talk to each other on the phone once in a while. But it has taken a lot of time.”

‘I COULD NOT SLEEP ALL NIGHT’

Benjamin was advised by his social workers to make the phone call and the recording. Benjamin, they said, had to put the past to rest. He had to admit to it, and to hear it being admitted to. In one of his reports, a therapist mentions that he is “suicidal” and “deeply depressed”. Another report said: “K. seems to have all the signs and symptoms of an untreated victim of years of sexual

abuse. That abuse has literally uprooted his personality. He lost his self-respect and integrity and now sees himself as a worthless sinner. The prevalent feelings of shame, helplessness, humiliation, devaluation, anger and confusion have formed a serious case of post-traumatic stress disorder, with all its symptoms of depression.”

During the telephone conversation, V. contests that he abused K. “more than once”. “I remember one time, just one time”, he says. “The rest of the time I did my best to put you on the right path. I did not realize that I hurt you so much due to that fact. Except for that one day, that one moment, I have spent my whole life trying to put you on God’s path, and the path of your calling. Not everything should be thrown away, let’s not exaggerate, here”.

- “Are you trying to say that during the entire affair it only happened one time?”

- “I touched you. I am sorry about that. Once again, I do not see how you can forget that I have spent my whole life trying my hardest to send you on the right path, and helping you all along so that you could become a priest and live a happy life.”

The discussion gets side-tracked. Benjamin says that he cannot accept that V. dismisses the situation so lightly. He announces that he is going to write a letter to the bishop of Ghent, Omer V.’s hierarchical commander. The bishop of Ghent, at the time, was Arthur Luysterman. For years he was also the bishop-referee for sexual abuse within the Belgian bishop’s seminar and the contact person between bishops and the inter-diocese commission on sexual abuse that was set up a few years previously. Omer V. tries to persuade his former pupil otherwise.

- “What does my bishop have to do with this? My bishop has nothing to do with something that happened in Congo. You must not ruin my life here. Do you think that you are doing a holy deed, a positive deed? I do not understand (...). I already said that I made a mistake at that moment in my life, that I did a deed that was absolutely wrong. Now I ask for your forgiveness. I know that God has forgiven me and I know that God has certainly forgiven you, too. If I were a danger to anyone today, it would be a good thing to get me kicked out, put me in jail, I agree. But if you look at my life, you can only say that I am contributing many positive things to the Church and to the people who know me. If you want to ruin all that, I do not understand how you can do that with a clear conscience. I do not understand that.”

- “I do not want to ruin you.”

- “You have already done that, Benjamin. I have not been able to sleep all night. I am so upset about what you are doing right now. If you feel it is necessary to involve a third party, please choose someone other than my bishop. The bishop is a friend of mine, I have worked for him and he trusts me.”

THE COMMISSION RESIDES

In May, bishop Arthur Luysterman sends K.’s complaint to Godelieve Halsberghe, the commission’s chair. She invites Omer V. to defend himself against the accusations, but the old pastor replies with a letter. He calls K. a delusional gold-digger. He writes: “I have had very close ties with Congo for more than 30 years and I can say that I know the Congolese very well.”

After sending his excuses a couple of times, V. finally turns up before the commission himself on August 26th, 2003. He does not make a very good impression. At first he flatly denies ever having touched K., and then he hides behind the fact that the facts of which he is accused “occurred a long time ago”. Then he talks about “one, incidental, trivial fact”, about which he can only remember that it occurred very “playfully”. He also throws out that at the time he did give K. 110,000 Belgian francs so that he could travel to Italy. That should not be forgotten, he says.

The further you dig into the file, more suspicions become facts. In a letter written by Godelieve Halsberghe addressed to one of the commission’s legal counselors, dated April 5th, 2004: “Master Storme, counsel to the diocese, asks how we plan to continue with the case. Master Storme fears that if no solution is found, Mr. K.’s lawyer will speak to the press.”

No Cure, No Pay

By then, two years had passed since K. sent the letter. They only tell him that a commission is working on it, so he decides to hire a lawyer. As American lawyers tend to do, according to the principle “no cure no pay”, he started to send threatening letters

to the institution that he regarded as the hierarchical commander of the inflicted damage. He requested the diocese of Ghent to pay his office 250,000 dollars, which he estimated to be the damage that his client suffered.

In the meantime, a tape recording was sent from the U.S., after which the commission decides that father V. has been stretching the truth: "The reality appears to be different, not only for K., but also for other boys." In another letter by Halsberghe to her counselor, in the beginning of 2005: "It is advisable that we re-attempt to arrange the case with the diocese. What do you think about a proposal to pay 50,000 Euros for moral damages? The diocese could advance this money."

A few weeks later, Benjamin K. notices that 25,000 dollars has been transferred into his account from Belgium. "By that time, I had already finished with that lawyer", he says. "My therapy was working; I was starting to leave it all behind me. I certainly appreciated the money, I must admit. They said that it was the first installment. I did not insist after that."

Somehow, it was a type of acknowledgement. It was a sign that a referee had been found who had made a decision. It meant that the Church was aware that when Omer V. was a missionary in Congo, he had misbehaved towards Benjamin K. when he was a child.

OVER TO RWANDA

In the past few months it became known that two Flemish priests who had been charged with child abuse in Belgium, had gone to Peru and Brazil to care for street children and orphans. The Omer V. case makes three *[sic] the sentence could mean "The Omer V. case is the third one of this case."*

A few years after the Rwandese genocide, he strikes in Kicukiro, a district of the capital, Kigali. Aided by fathers of the Salesians of Don Bosco, he starts a project in 1996 to care for children orphaned by the genocide. He starts to build a vocational and primary school, for 3000 children, and he goes back and forth between Kigali and Ghent in order to raise funds for the construction project. Together with his brother, he founds the NGO Asor, which stands for Action for Educating the Orphans of Rwanda. V. finds funding at Rotary clubs in the province of East-Flanders.

In the eyes of his commanders, he was accused of child abuse (the diocese paid for the damage compensation). Whether or not he was found guilty, pastor V. has not become afraid. He does not exactly think that he has something to hide. On May 20, 2006, in Kicukiro, he welcomes a delegation of six from the East-Flanders provincial government and gives them a tour of the school terrain. Six months later, on January 9th, 2007, he and his NGO are welcomed in the European Parliament in Brussels by European parliament members Anne Van Lancker (sp.a) and Johan Van Hecke (Open Vld). On November 21, 2008, a feast is organized in his honor, in which the pastor from East-Flanders is praised as 'ambassador for peace' by the Women's Association for World Peace. On the Asor website, V. is named as a new father Damian. The same website also mentions that the NGO, of which Omer V. is the director, "organized several seminaries together with the High Commissioner for Human Rights in order to raise awareness for children's rights, and especially orphaned children".

The NGO Asor is directed by Omer V., by his brother and a supporter. "I am completely taken aback", he said. "We have never suspected anything. Nobody ever said anything to us. Not by the diocese, not anyone."

Benjamin K. found out about how his abuser is doing by surfing the web. "You don't believe your eyes", he said. "Pedophilia is an illness. Victims need help, but so do the perpetrators. They should have prevented him from being around children. That is why I did what I did, not for the 25,000 dollars."

We tried to contact Omer V., but we were not successful. "He just left for Rwanda this week", is what they told us at the NGO, "to care for the fate of those poor children there."

Omer V. in a telephone conversation with his victim:

If you look at my life, you can only say that I am contributing many positive things to the Church and to the people that know me. If you want to ruin it all, I do not understand how you can do that with a clear conscience.

Victim Benjamin K.:

You don't believe your eyes. Pedophilia is an illness. Victims need help, but so do the perpetrators. They should have prevented him from being around children. That is why I did what I did, not for the 25,000 dollars.

Omer V. said to his victim:

I know that God has forgiven me, and I know that God has forgiven you as well.