

Survivor statement from Joe Cercone

Ladies and gentlemen

I stand before you today as a broken man and, as a broken child.

I was only thirteen years old.

At thirteen, a child should be worried about homework, friendships, sports, and what they want to be when they grow up. I was not given that chance. Instead, I was placed in the care of someone who held power, authority, and trust—and that trust was abused in the most devastating way.

Parents, I ask you to pause for a moment and imagine sending your child somewhere you believed was safe. Somewhere tied to faith, morality, and protection. Now imagine discovering that the very place you trusted caused your child harm that will follow them for the rest of their life. My parents do not have to imagine that nightmare. My family does not have to imagine it. They lived it --with me-- and they will continue to live with it every day.

I want to be clear about why I am here. I am not here to shock you. I am not here to relive my trauma for attention or sympathy. Speaking about this is not easy. It never has been. I am here because healing requires truth, and truth requires accountability. I am here because what happened to me was wrong, and because silence is what allowed it to happen in the first place.

This case is not just about one priest, or one child. It is about an institution that knew, or should have known, what was happening, and failed to stop it. It is about the systems that protect abusers instead of children. It is about the long-term consequences of choosing reputation over responsibility.

From seventh grade at age thirteen to today, at twenty-three years old, I am still dealing with this trauma. Abuse does not end when the acts stop. It burrows itself into your mind and body. It shows up in anxiety, depression, fear, anger, shame,

and confusion. It affects how you sleep. How you trust. How you relate to authority. How you see yourself in the mirror.

Some days, the weight is manageable. Other days, it feels unbearable. Trauma does not run on a schedule, and it does not disappear just because the dust has settled.

I was fortunate in one way: I had parents who believed me, supported me, and fought for me. The amount of help I have received from my family is immeasurable. Not every survivor has that. Many children were silenced. Many were ignored. Many were told to pray, to forgive, or to stay quiet. Some never received help at all. Some did not survive the weight of what was done to them.

That reality matters. It matters because this case is not only about what happened to me—it is about what could happen again if institutions are not held accountable.

This abuse affected far more than just me. It affected my mother and father, who carry the pain of knowing they trusted the wrong people with their child. It affected my sisters and my brother, who had to watch someone they love struggle in ways no sibling should have to witness. It affected my doctors, nurses, teachers, therapists, employers, coworkers, and even therapy animals. Trauma spreads outward. It touches every part of a survivor's life and every relationship connected to them.

No amount of money will ever make what happened to me right. There is no dollar amount that can restore innocence, erase memories, or give me back the childhood that was taken from me. Now that criminal accountability is no longer possible, civil accountability is the only path left. When the individuals who committed these acts cannot be prosecuted, responsibility does not disappear. It must still exist somewhere.

Institutions that enabled, concealed, reassigned, or ignored abusive behavior must be held accountable for the harm they allowed to continue. Accountability is not punishment—it is recognition. It is acknowledgment. It is saying, “This mattered. This should never have happened.”

I understand that some parishioners may feel anger, frustration, or resentment knowing their money may go toward survivors like me. I do not take that lightly. But for years, donations were used to protect the institution—not children. Money was used to move abusive priests, to keep secrets, and to preserve appearances. The real cost was paid by children—by our bodies, our minds, and our families.

Forgiveness is often discussed in cases like this, sometimes as if it is expected, or even required. Forgiveness is described as a virtue, something that should come easily or freely. But forgiveness is not free. It has a cost.

Forgiveness requires emotional labor. It requires confronting pain that never should have existed. It asks survivors to process anger, betrayal, fear, and grief—often without receiving a true apology or full accountability. It can require accepting that things will never be the same, and mourning what was lost.

Forgiveness does not excuse harm. It does not erase the past. It does not mean the damage disappears. And forgiveness should never be demanded in place of accountability.

If forgiveness ever comes for me, it comes after truth. After responsibility. After justice.

Today, I am asking you to see me—not just as a victim, but as someone who has carried the consequences of institutional failure for a decade. I am asking you to understand that this harm was real, that it was preventable, and that accountability matters.

Your decision does not only affect me. It affects every survivor watching this case and wondering whether their pain counts, whether their voice matters, and an institution that can fully say "They were wrong"

I am here to heal.

And healing requires accountability.

Thank you