

Cheyenne diocese struggles with abuse revelations about popular bishop

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[PHOTO: This photo shows the offices for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cheyenne and the Cathedral of St. Mary, Thursday, June 13, 2019 in Cheyenne, Wyo. The diocese has published a list of 11 former clergy in Wyoming it says have had substantiated claims of sexual abuse made against them. (Credit: Mead Gruver / AP.)

[This is part two of Crux's three-part investigative series into Bishop Joseph Hart, who could become the first U.S. bishop to face criminal prosecution for sexual abuse. [Read part one here](#). Part three will run tomorrow.]

CHEYENNE, Wyoming - Nearly three decades had passed since Martin last stepped foot inside a Catholic church.

Yet as he sat in the pews of the Cathedral of Saint Mary in Cheyenne for Good Friday service last April, he knew Bishop Steven Biegler was speaking directly to him.

“Over the last year, we have seen that the Church’s leaders have been weak and sinful,” said the bishop. “Yet, Christ still goes to the cross for us. His death is still stronger than all of our horrible sins. The blood and water flowing from Christ is the greatest force in the universe. So we can be reborn.”

“What does that reborn church look like?” he asked. “In a church reborn, those who have been harmed are restored. They experience their own re-birth. They are restored as we listen to their stories and tell them, ‘I believe you.’”

One year prior to that homily, Biegler had flown to New York to say those very words in person to Martin, a pseudonym, who after nearly two decades of unsuccessfully trying to convince both law enforcement and church officials that he was an abuse victim of Bishop Joseph Hart, finally felt some form of vindication by a bishop who believed him.

(It is the policy of *Crux* not to identify the victims of sexual abuse who do not want to be named.)

Yet not only had Biegler believed him, he had taken action - hiring outside investigators to examine claims against Hart, which they found to be credible, barring him from public ministry, and making multiple trips to the Vatican to lobby for swift adjudication.

In June, the diocese announced, and the Vatican confirmed, that Pope Francis had greenlighted a penal process for Hart, who at age 87 could become the second U.S. prelate to be removed from the priesthood in under a year’s time, the other being former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

“He couldn’t dare question the bishop”

When Hart arrived in Cheyenne in 1976 as an auxiliary bishop, he found a diocese eager to embrace the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which had concluded just a decade earlier.

The diocese encompassed the whole state, nearly 100,000 square miles, but at the time had only about 50,000 Catholics.

Hart, who succeeded Bishop Hubert Newell in 1978 as the ordinary of the diocese, had quickly garnered a reputation for being an affable young prelate and capable administrator, forging close ties to state officials, pastoring a parish in Casper, the state’s second largest city, and regularly spending time getting to know the local families, becoming a strong champion of lay involvement in church life.

For that reason, when Martin’s father suddenly abandoned the family in 1978 - leaving his mother to care for four kids - it was a welcome intervention when Hart reached out directly to lend a hand to the family as they struggled to get back on their feet.

As the Catholic community rallied around Martin’s family - helping his mother find a job as a secretary at a nearby Catholic school, providing groceries for the family, and occasionally assisting in paying the bills - Hart himself took an interest in Martin, asking the then-twelve-year-old to assist him with funerals, weddings and other Mass celebrations at the cathedral as an altar boy.

On one occasion at Hart’s residence, after Hart had been auxiliary bishop for more than a year, he told Martin that he wanted to offer the sacrament of confession to him. He brought Martin up to his bedroom in the bishop’s residence.

After Martin tried unsuccessfully to rebuff the request to confess while sitting on the side of the bishop's bed, he ticked off a list of ordinary sins, which did not satisfy the bishop. Hart then pressed Martin for details about his knowledge of sex and asked him questions about his own sexual habits.

"He was using words that I didn't even know what they meant," Martin recalled to *Crux* in an interview in New York, where he now lives.

That line of questioning continued, which also led to sexual demands forced onto Martin by Hart - all of which was happening while Martin was meant to be confessing to the bishop.

When Martin hesitated, Hart told him that "everything the Church was doing for my family could be lost if I lied to the bishop during confession or if I refused his demands."

Martin claims that the abuse continued over the next year, including trips out of town, without him saying a word to anyone, lest he bring even further complications to his fractured family.

"We were from a long line of Irish Catholics," Martin's sister told *Crux* in an interview in Cheyenne.

"When my grandmother would come into town and see the bishop saying Mass, she just thought it was such a big deal. Martin couldn't dare question the bishop; it was just the environment he was raised in."

An old accusation; a new bishop

2001 was a difficult year for Martin.

The September 11th attacks had left him, along with most fellow New Yorkers, devastated and feeling uncertain about the future. Then there were reports of a young man who committed suicide after having accused Hart of abuse during camping trips when he was a teenager. As the Church began to malign the young suicide victim, claiming that he was a troubled man whom the Church had tried to help, Martin knew the stories of that man being abused by Hart were true because they so closely matched his own experience.

That same year, as he was about to get married, he finally told his sister of the abuse that he had experienced at the hands of Hart.

Following her encouragement - and the prodding of his therapist - he reached out to the Cheyenne Police Department and informed them that he would like to file a complaint against Bishop Joseph Hart, who had retired in September 2001 but was still living in Cheyenne.

Martin recalls the detective responding with skepticism and, in his view, putting up roadblocks from pursuing this further.

"He asked me if I was willing to return to Wyoming to pursue this case," Martin recalled to *Crux*, "and after 9/11, I just didn't have the emotional bandwidth to pursue it any further."

Local authorities quickly completed what the family recalls as merely a perfunctory investigation and, in a press release unusual for its specificity about the victim's identity and disparagement of the accusations, Hart was cleared of any wrongdoing.

"It is clear that the allegations are without merit and that therefore the case must be unfounded," said then-Natrona County's District Attorney Kevin Meenan after a three-month investigation by the Cheyenne Police Department.

Meenan was later disbarred after pleading guilty to felonies on an unrelated matter.

Yet when Biegler was named to lead the Wyoming Church in March 2017, outgoing Bishop Paul Etienne briefed him on the history of Hart and informed him that he had written to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2010 to alert them of the matter, but the case seemed stalled.

Additionally, Etienne had restricted Hart's ministry within the diocese, but lacked the ability to control what Hart could do outside of it.

That knowledge would lead to Biegler having the difficult task of visiting Hart before his official ordination as bishop to tell him he would not be allowed to concelebrate his installation Mass. Hart replied by saying it would be the most embarrassing day of his career.

Upon assuming his new post, Biegler began to review Hart's files where he learned in detail his history as a Kansas City priest, where the diocese had already entered into settlements with ten victims alleging Hart had abused them during his two decades as a priest of the diocese.

As a part of that diocesan review process, the investigator flew to New York where he met Martin in person.

Soon thereafter, Biegler announced that he was reopening the investigations into Hart, and in July 2018, after a thorough consideration of the evidence from an outside investigator, the diocese announced that it had found two allegations against Hart "credible and substantiated."

The shock announcement was punctuated by news from Biegler that the diocese was also cooperating with the local police in a new criminal investigation into Hart, as Wyoming has no statute of limitations for criminal cases.

When Biegler met with Martin's sister in Cheyenne and told her that the diocese would soon announce that they believed Martin, along with another victim, to be victims of Hart, she burst into tears and thanked Biegler for saying the words she'd longed to hear. That thanks, however, also came with a request.

"You need to tell Martin yourself," she told him.

Two months later Biegler flew to New York where he sat for hours in Martin's living room and made it clear that Martin's accusations were not only believed, they would result in consequences both ecclesiastical and criminal for the former bishop.

Biegler returned to Wyoming assuring Martin that he would do all he could to ensure that justice was rendered.

"It's all about the relationships"

This past July, at Cheyenne's Frontier Days - an annual western celebration that doubles the town's population and boasts of having the world's largest outdoor rodeo - Bishop Joseph Hart stood under the shade of a tree near St. Mary's Cathedral to take in one of the major street parades. It was almost exactly one year since the diocese had announced its findings.

"I looked at my mom and we both saw him," said Martin's sister.

"I just can't believe he still shows his face," she told *Crux*.

For Biegler, one of the chief challenges, both with the faithful at home and among his fellow brother bishops, has been confronting shocking allegations against a man they have known as a Catholic bishop for 43 years and who during that time was a larger than life personality, recognized by everyone in the state, and well-regarded by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

“It is natural to believe a friend whom you’ve known for decades, rather than an anonymous victim, especially when many people see victims with suspicion. Society has an attitude of suspicion and distrust toward victims,” Biegler told *Crux*.

Those longstanding relationships in small towns where everyone seems to know everyone have been especially frustrating for both Biegler and Martin’s family, where a figure like Hart can still show up at the town’s major events and in some quarters manage to receive a hero’s welcome.

Darryl Erickson, a long-time parishioner at St. Mary’s, who is the son of Cheyenne’s former mayor and a retired police officer, attested to those long-time relationships, saying it was difficult for him to reconcile his relationship with Hart with the allegations against the bishop, leading to skepticism of the latest actions taken against him.

Erickson recalls Hart as someone with a great sense of humor and “easy to talk to whether it’s about sports or current events.” For that reason, he admits that he believes Hart’s claims that he is innocent.

“Child abuse and the problems the Catholic Church is facing are very grave,” he told *Crux*. “The allegations are very serious, but I temper that with my historical relationship and friendship with Bishop Hart.”

He said that he believed Biegler has a “difficult job” and “he makes his decisions based on the information he has.”

“I just counter that with my own personal relationship of who I believe Bishop Hart to be,” he added.

Martin’s sister recalled to *Crux* attending multiple social events and being shamed by one-time friends for disparaging the reputation of a man they believed to be a devoted bishop and priest.

Charlie Hardy, a former priest of the diocese and well-known local politician, told *Crux* that he was stunned when he heard the initial allegations, as was everyone else, because at the time it just wasn’t natural to believe such things could be true.

Meanwhile, at the Knights of Columbus hall in Cheyenne, a portrait of Hart still hangs, and the retired bishop continues to be a regular at their events.

For Biegler, whose first two years as a new bishop have been dominated by the Hart case, it’s been a difficult learning experience. Rather than spending that time getting to know the local families and casting a vision for the future, he’s first had to help reckon with its past.

“Historically, as a church, we were concerned with the party we knew. In many cases, church leaders saw victims as adversaries not brothers and sisters, and they failed to show proper concern for them,” he told *Crux*.

In the last year, he’s traveled the state holding listening sessions trying to answer concerns of Catholic laity and priests alike who are seeking answers to understand the bold actions he’s taken since his arrival - often being subjected to hostile questions from both priests and laity who knew Hart well.

What's become evident to him, he recalls, is that historically, "priests view fellow priests as brothers."

"How do we now see victims in the same light?" he asks, noting that in most listening sessions more than an hour would pass before anyone would bother asking a question about the victim.

That emphasis on victims is welcome news for Martin - even if it's decades too late and what he believes to be the rare exception for church leaders in responding to abuse. He said that a cloak of respectability is essential for sexual predators to continue their abuse.

Martin said that Hart had done many beneficial and kind things for his family. He knew the charming, gregarious, and generous Hart as a pillar of the community, and as someone who had audiences with the pope - someone whose word would be believed over his own.

"Hart was also someone who used that reputation to pursue an agenda of sexual abuse for decades," he told *Crux*.

In 2008, he recalls sitting around a conference room in Missouri where he was surrounded by fellow victims of Hart and diocesan officials.

"We are going to do better," Bishop Robert Finn, the then-bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph pledged to Martin and the other victims on hand as he met with them after a record payout of ten million dollars after the diocese reached a civil settlement against Hart.

Less than five years later, Finn would be forced to resign for his own handling of abuse in another prominent case - becoming the only U.S. bishop to be found guilty of the crime of failing to report a priest suspected of the abuse of minors.

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