News



Razor wire and a watchtower are seen at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 2007. Two inmates there, half-brothers Bernard Joseph and Marcus Hamilton, are serving life terms for murdering Josephite Fr. Patrick McCarthy in 1988. They accuse McCarthy and another Josephite priest of sexual abuse. (Newscom/ZUMA Press/Robin Nelson)



by Jason Berry

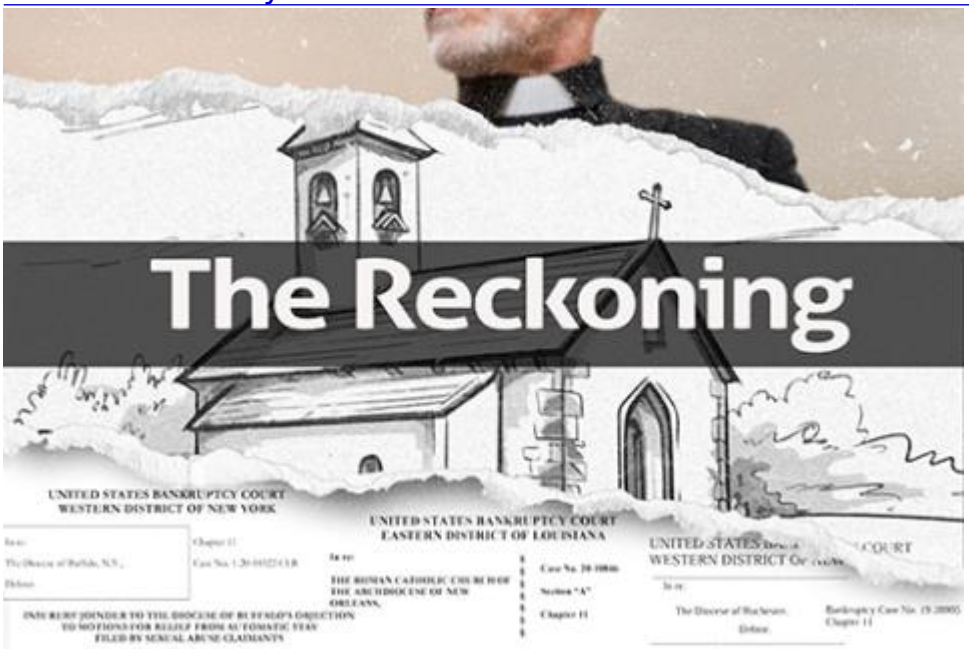
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New Orleans — November 18, 2025

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(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Some 660 alleged survivors have claims against the New Orleans Archdiocese in its long bankruptcy. Attorneys Frank Lamothe III and Kristi Schubert have 75 clients. Twenty-three of them are prisoners; most allege abuse at two long-shuttered orphanages, Hope Haven and Madonna Manor.

Two of these men had a different path to prison.

Bernard Joseph, 57, and Marcus Hamilton, 65, half-brothers, are serving life terms in Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, for murdering a priest.

Their stories, revealed here in full for the first time, cite their lawsuits against the New Orleans Archdiocese, voluminous documents in a death penalty appeal, and NCR's Zoom interviews with each man at an office with attorney Schubert present. Prison officials refused permission for in-person interviews.

This story also involves two Josephite priests. One was murdered. The other has testified that he was trying to help the brothers, who say both religious men abused them sexually.

The St. Joseph's Society of the Sacred Heart's website describes it as a male religious order "serving the African American community through the proclamation of the Gospel and our personal witness." Josephites have a long history in New Orleans, notably at St. Augustine, a distinguished boys' high school whose alumni include music superstar Jon Batiste and former New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet, along with major athletes and politicians.

Josephite Fr. Patrick McCarthy, 37, head of the religion department, was also pastor at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in a working-class neighborhood. McCarthy had a 1976 degree in psychiatric social work from Rochester Institute of Technology and a 1982 master's from Washington Theological Union.

The rectory was decorated for Christmas on Dec. 18, 1988, when the church caretaker found McCarthy's naked body in an upstairs bedroom on a blood-soaked floor, hands and feet tied, stabbed in the neck, strangled by a cord. Police began a manhunt for Hamilton. Police reports said McCarthy "befriended" Hamilton, "allowing him to stay at the rectory as a cook while he looked for work."



Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in New Orleans is seen in a photo from 2008. The blue building next door is the church rectory. (Wikimedia Commons/Infrogmation of New Orleans)

"A foolish act of horrible violence," said Archbishop Philip Hannan, who had retired as archbishop of New Orleans earlier that December. "Father McCarthy is now in the presence of the Lord that he served so well."

Hannan told United Press International the slaying stemmed from "an act of charity."

On New Year's Eve, the FBI arrested Hamilton in Baytown, Texas, "without incident."

"I never denied killing the homosexual priest from day one when FBI arrested me. I told the FBI exactly what took place," Hamilton told NCR via Zoom. The words poured out in a river from the man with a graying beard, glasses and paralytic left arm close by his chest.

"He kept after me and I was aggravated and this man lying buck naked on his belly like he was a real woman and I picked up a Black and Decker hammer. Some people doing renovation of the rectory left tools ... and I killed him, but it wasn't armed robbery! The homicide detectives found over 20,000 cash. Now if I was a robber, wouldn't I have taken it?"

Hamilton, who in fact drove off in McCarthy's car with a TV and other items, was telegraphing a larger point about wellsprings of his rage.

Joseph said his brother was hallucinating at the time.

Hamilton spent 30 years on death row with a long legal challenge by Nick Trenticosta, former director of the Death Penalty Resource Center at Loyola University New Orleans.

Trenticosta had a joint 1977 bachelor's in sociology from the University of New Orleans and in social work from Southern University at New Orleans, which is a historically Black school. As a community organizer, he had seen the representation at trial of Black men in a state with one of the world's highest incarceration rates, and he went to Louisiana State University Law School, he told NCR, "for the express purpose of representing people on death row."

In 1998, Trenticosta took Hamilton's post-conviction case, challenging then-District Attorney Harry Connick's office over evidence not admitted at trial. Trenticosta secured affidavits with family members for one purpose: to spare his client death by lethal injection.

Advertisement

Family dynamics

Hamilton and his half-sibling were among the youngest of Genevieve Hamilton Joseph's 12 children. She came from a plantation village in St. Bernard Parish (county) south of town.

Hamilton's maternal grandmother, Ethel Woods Augustine, spoke of her daughter's mental health issues in one of the affidavits taken by Trenticosta.

"Genevieve was not right from birth," said Augustine, who noted she herself had been hospitalized "a few times" for mental health problems. "The doctors told me that what was wrong with [Genevieve] could not be cured. She would not talk to other children or play with anyone. ... She wouldn't play with store-bought toys. She had figures made from moss and sticks and she talked to them. They all had names."

Augustine said Genevieve was 13 when she was "taken advantage of sexually because she was not able to protect herself."

Genevieve married Godchaux Joseph. They were not together long. Genevieve Hamilton Joseph had a succession of breakdowns and hospitalizations as she gave birth to one child after another, a dozen in all, by several men she never married. The children were in and out of relatives' homes or foster care.

Savior or predator?

In the late 1970s, Marcus Hamilton had gone from a foster home back to an apartment with his mother and young siblings. In 1984, a lawyer was appealing a death penalty ruling against one of Hamilton's older brothers, convicted of murdering a liquor store clerk.

Paul Oberg, a part-time prison chaplain and a member of the Josephite community working to become a priest, testified in an affidavit in that case that he met Hamilton through the youth program at St. Peter Claver, a predominantly Black parish in the downtown Sixth Ward. Oberg, who was teaching at St. Augustine High, had a degree in theology and certification in criminology, clinical counseling, drug abuse and alcoholism. He said Genevieve Hamilton Joseph was "very depressed ... unable to cope with family living [or] provide guidance to her children."

"I was able to establish a relationship of trust with Marcus. I was able to guide him in directions that would lead to future employment. Marcus had lived in foster homes and had never had a good family life. I was able to make Marcus see the possibility of a better life."



St. Augustine High School in New Orleans, photographed in July 2020 (Dreamstime/William Morgan)

In his Zoom interview, Joseph told NCR: "When Marcus introduced Paul Oberg into our family, [my mother] felt he was a godsend.

"She'd call him to bring her to make [buy] groceries. She was all-out dependent."

Oberg "was going to some kinda seminary or monk school to be a full-fledged priest," Hamilton said by Zoom, echoing his lawsuit. "I couldn't be more than 12 or 13. Asking me stupid questions about my family members' background, he found out my biological mother could not raise a child because she was paranoid schizophrenic."

"Paul Oberg performed oral sex on me. I just got promoted to eighth grade," he added. "He introduced me to Patrick McCarthy."

Grooming

"We all knew about Marcus' relationship with the priest, Paul Oberg," said Augustine, the grandmother. "When Marcus was living with his mother, [Oberg] would buy them anything they wanted ... new televisions and other things, and Marcus knew he could get money from the priest at any time."

"Our mother got angry with Brother Paul because he wasn't spending any time or attention on the girls," Pam Douglas, an older sister, stated in her affidavit.

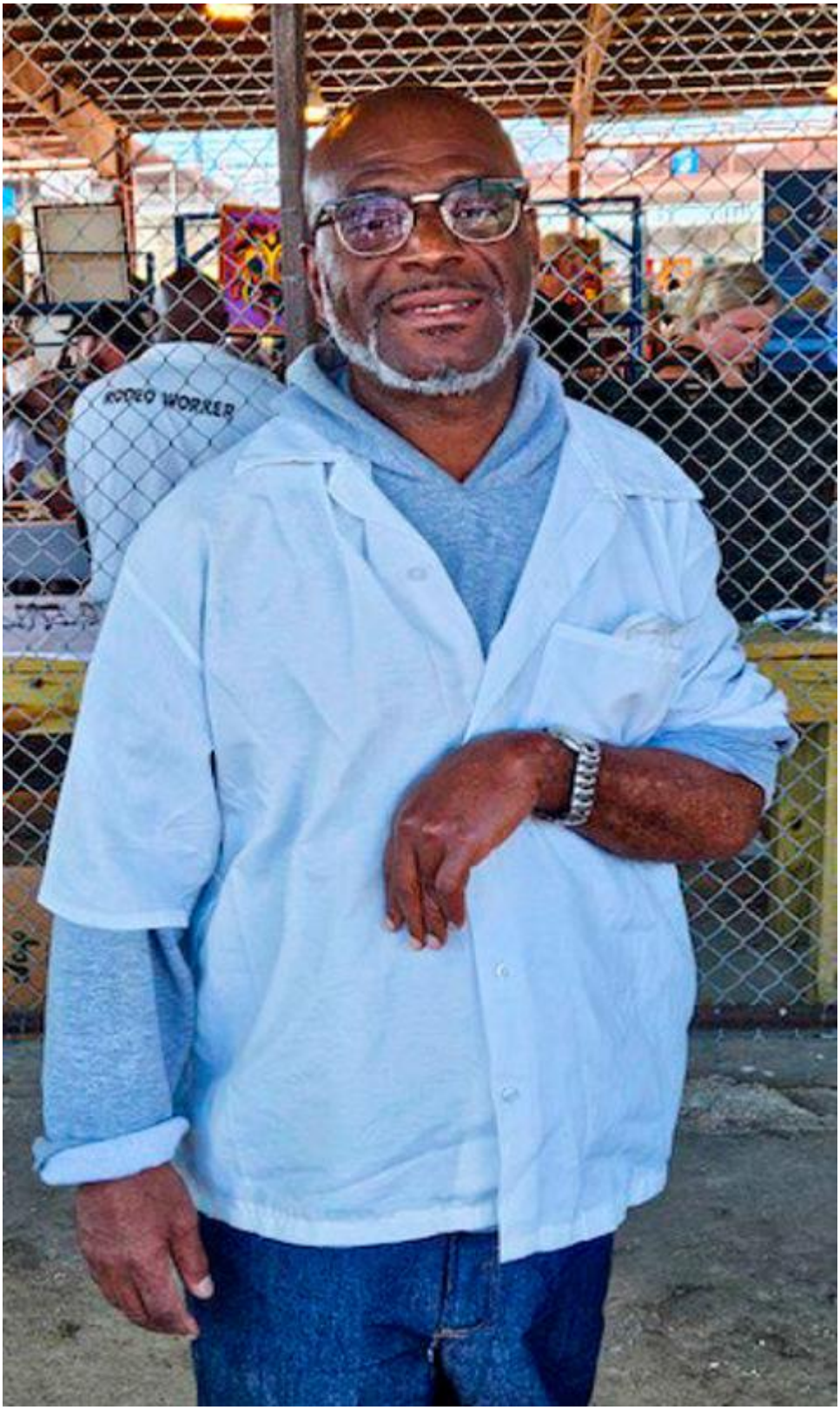
"After that, Brother Paul took Odessa shopping one time and bought her something, but it didn't last. ... This made our mother more angry, and she would forbid Brother Paul from driving up to the house," Douglas said. "Marcus and Bernard would meet Brother Paul around the corner — like they had appointments. Brother Paul bought the boys expensive clothes, shoes, radios and gave them cash."

"I always believed that whatever Marcus did was the result of all the agony coming out of him," she said.

Hamilton's lawsuit alleges that after he stopped being a participant in the parish youth program, "Father Oberg continued sexually abusing me approximately 2-3 times per week" until Hamilton left for military service.

Rescuing his mother

Federal funding in the 1990s for Loyola's capital appeals allowed Trenticosta to hire a topflight forensic psychiatrist to evaluate Hamilton on death row.



Marcus Hamilton at Louisiana State Penitentiary, in an undated photo (Courtesy of Kristi Schubert)

He hired Dr. Frederick Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, who was renowned for treating sex offenders. The Baltimore clinic treated criminals too dangerous for most mental hospitals.

After citing the history of mental illness, abuse and trauma in the family, Berlin wrote that at age 12, Hamilton "tried to make a home with his real mother, Genevieve, and her younger children. He told his sister Sylvia he wanted to 'be a family.' But his mother reportedly told him she couldn't keep him unless she could get welfare for him. Around the time he met Paul Oberg, Genevieve's 3 youngest children had been removed to state care; she had been taken to the Salvation Army. She could not pay rent. It's strongly possible that the money Paul Oberg offered Marcus afforded him an opportunity, in a sense, to 'rescue' his mother.

"Paul Oberg's abuse of Marcus Hamilton took the form of 'seduction' as opposed to violent bodily rape. He enticed the child with perhaps more money than he had ever seen in his life ... and best of all, personal power. For possibly the first time, Marcus Hamilton possessed something someone else wanted and valued."

Berlin wrote that Hamilton had a breakdown at 15; he was committed to a mental hospital. Three months later he "joined the Job Corps, where he learned to cook and to weld, and later the Army, where he was arrested on drug charges and received a bad conduct discharge."

Trenticosta told NCR that Hamilton "was thrown in jail for dealing drugs in Germany and sent to Leavenworth." Hamilton told the lawyer that back in New Orleans, he would go over to Josephite-run St. Augustine, "that it was easy as getting a car fixed to have sex with a priest or brother and get money. He was down and out when he went to live with McCarthy at Blessed Sacrament."

"After Marcus came back from the Army, he would come by and ask if he could 'borrow' my house for an hour or two," stated Douglas, his sister.

"He would tell me Brother Paul was coming over and they were going to talk." When she returned, Oberg was gone "but Marcus was always coming out of the shower. I knew something was going on."

"When he started having seizures due to the congenital brain defect that had not yet been diagnosed, his alcohol and drug use reportedly increased," wrote Berlin. "His mental condition at the time he moved in with the victim, Father Patrick McCarthy,

had deteriorated due to the loss of his job, his worry over what was wrong with his brain, his increased use of drugs and alcohol ... and the unresolved emotional effects of a lifetime of trauma."

> "I always believed that whatever Marcus did was the result of all the agony coming out of him."
>
> —Pam Douglas
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Berlin opined that Hamilton had a " 'flashback' ... to the sexual abuse of his childhood" and "intense rage that contributed significantly to the tragedy."

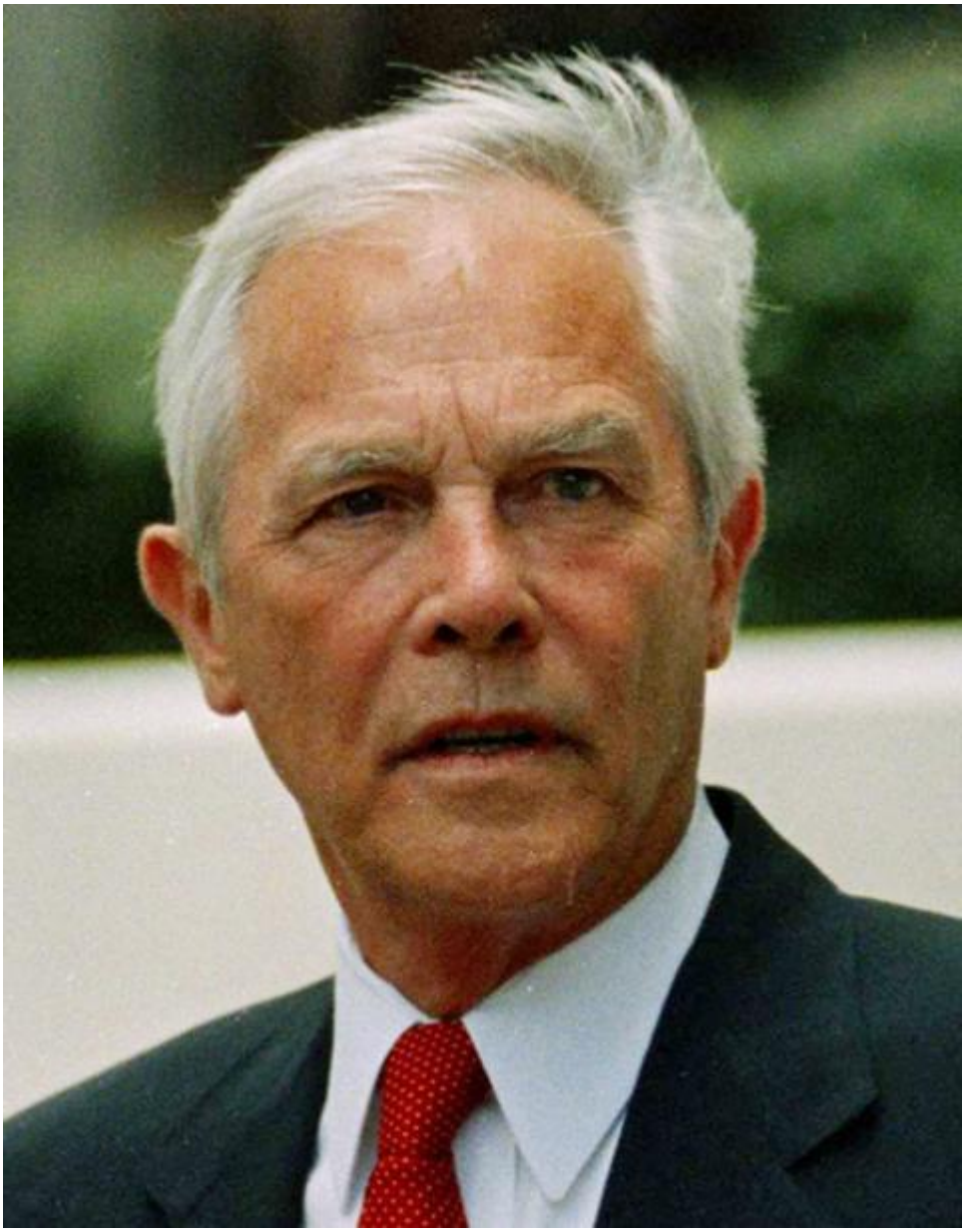
Trenticosta secured the document from Berlin seven years after Hamilton's trial in 1991.

Back then, Loyola Death Penalty Resource Center was representing all death row inmates in Louisiana with help from law firms doing pro bono work. In 1989, as Hamilton awaited trial in jail, the judge appointed attorneys Edward Kohnke IV and Michael Simpson from a blue-chip firm as his counsel.

"In those days the public defender's office was underfunded. We took the case pro bono," Kohnke, a veteran corporate defense attorney, told NCR.

Simpson, now a U.S. attorney, did not respond to an interview request.

Kohnke had played basketball at De La Salle High. He says he fended off a sexual pass by one of the Christian Brothers who taught him and he had friends with the same problem. By the end of law school, he had left the church. About Hamilton, Kohnke thought, "This was a crime of reverse passion, someone white hot with anger, a classic case of abuse." Demonstrating that background could sway a jury to a manslaughter verdict and no death penalty.



New Orleans District Attorney Harry Connick in 1990 (AP/Bill Haber)

Kohnke and Simpson sent discovery subpoenas for documents to the New Orleans Archdiocese, the Josephites, St. Augustine High and two parishes, seeking to show lax oversight of predators in religious life. Kohnke said it would be tough getting the DA's office to agree on documents, because Connick did not want to embarrass the church.

"The idea of pedophile priests was going to be a hard sell," said Kohnke.

Hamilton was doing push-ups in his cell when a cerebral hemorrhage sent him to the hospital, his left side paralyzed after a long recuperation. With the trial postponed, Kohnke and Simpson moved on to active cases. Three years later, a psychiatrist determined Hamilton capable of standing trial. He had a new attorney.

Wishing for a time machine

Joseph's Zoom interview echoed the history of abuse. In 1979, Oberg allegedly took the 11-year-old on "an overnight trip to go fishing in Mississippi. He told my mother other boys would be going, but there were no other boys that went with us." Joseph told NCR that when they got to the house in Mississippi, "Oberg stated that God wanted 'to bless my body with a special treat' " — which led to a frenetic jumble of oral and anal sex that left the boy with rectal bleeding.

Taking a minor victim across a state line for sex is a federal crime.

The brothers' affidavits and lawsuits portray Oberg as a long-term source of sex-for-money. "When I was around 15 or 16 years old, Father Paul Oberg introduced me to Father Patrick McCarthy, who also began abusing me," Joseph said in the lawsuit.

When Hamilton returned from the Army in 1987, Joseph was 19, taking night classes for a high school equivalency degree. Joseph had had a few scrapes with the law and gotten arrested when his half-brother sent him to pawn a stolen handgun "so he could get some rock cocaine."

"Father Paul Oberg bonded me out," Joseph told NCR.

"If there was such a thing as a time machine and to live my life in a normal way, wishing Marcus had never met Paul Oberg — that would have meant I wouldn't have met him and what we had to go through the pain in my family, no one would have gone through this."

Hallucinations and reality

By 1988, Joseph was in love with a woman, which he describes as the most rewarding relationship of his life. Joseph said that when Hamilton, stoned-out and homeless, arrived at the rectory, Joseph was not surprised that McCarthy took him in.



Bernard Joseph speaks to a reporter via Zoom from Louisiana State Penitentiary on June 30, 2025. (Screenshot courtesy of Kristi Schubert)

According to a state supreme court summary of events upholding Joseph's life sentence, he went to the rectory at the priest's invitation for dinner and to decorate the Christmas tree. Afterward, McCarthy went upstairs to bed. The brothers "stayed downstairs and talked," the high court states. Hamilton told Joseph "he was getting fed up with Fr. McCarthy because Fr. McCarthy had been making sexual advances toward him. Hamilton feared that Fr. McCarthy was going to make him move out of the rectory since he refused the advances."

The court stated: "Fr. McCarthy consulted with Fr. Oberg, who knew the entire Hamilton family. Fr. Oberg advised Fr. McCarthy that there was no room at Fr. Oberg's rectory and that Fr. McCarthy should not give defendant any money. Following this conversation, Fr. McCarthy made arrangements for defendant to move out on Friday, December 18."

Joseph said he was about to leave the rectory when Hamilton "started hallucinating" and flew into a rage against McCarthy. Joseph told NCR that Hamilton struck his

brother repeatedly and told him to get an extension cord. Joseph said Hamilton "was saying to himself, he's got horns! And I'm thinking on the spot, it's the drugs. I didn't see no horns — he's in another world."

Hamilton poured salt in McCarthy's nose and mouth to stop him from yelling. After the priest died, Hamilton took the rectory car and a few items and dropped Joseph at their mother's house, saying, "Don't tell anybody."

Several nights later, when a New Orleans Police Department homicide detective knocked on the door, Joseph made no resistance and went to the police station and gave a confession.

Convictions

When a homicide detective did a second pretrial interview with Hamilton, he admitted to murdering a local drug dealer, for which he was never charged; the prosecution used the information as strengthened proof he needed the death penalty.

The New Orleans crime scene evidence was overwhelming. Joseph, who was tried first, offered no testimony on Oberg, fearing that the woman he loved sitting in court would think him abnormal. Oberg testified as to the family's dysfunction, as one who had been helping them, and as an opponent of the death penalty.

"He must have felt bad in some kind of way to know how this transpired with Marcus and the relationship he and I had with sex involved," Joseph told NCR. "It was messed up ... the jury seeing him as someone totally innocent."

When Joseph was convicted of murder; the jury deadlocked on the death penalty. He received life without parole.

> "I said, 'My life is on the line, I want this to come out so the jurors know!' "
>
> —Marcus Hamilton
>
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When Hamilton was finally tried in 1991, he, too, did not testify. "My attorney said, 'Man, look here, we believe you but Harry Connick do not want the publicity coming

out about homosexual priests and reputation of the Catholic Church.' I said, 'My life is on the line, I want this to come out so the jurors know!' "

Given Hamilton's mental history and propensity for verbal explosions, his trial attorney, Franz Zibilich, a former prosecutor, persuaded his client to take the Fifth Amendment. The court approved a reading of his confession to the FBI as evidence. The state supreme court noted, "The homosexual theme arose in defendant's confession, which was read in its entirety to the jury. [Hamilton] stated that the priest 'put his hands on me every time I got near him' and kept asking defendant to 'sleep in his room.' "

Oberg's history with the family and alleged legacy of sexual abuses of the brothers never made it into testimony.

Citing the armed robbery of McCarthy as exacerbating a severely brutal crime, the jury in 1991 sentenced Hamilton to death.

A past that would not die

Capital punishment appeals often last for years as attorneys seek mitigating facts or new evidence to persuade judges for a rehearing to seek a revised sentence or stay of execution. Court calendars can be tediously slow. Hamilton was on death row at Angola, in solitary confinement, with an hour outside the cell for conversation with other inmates and exercise. Summer temperatures could be scorching; TV sets droned on the cellblock hall.

When Trenticosta took on Hamilton's appeal, the two men struck a rapport. Trenticosta's first goal — a petition for post-conviction relief to the district attorney — was to get the execution halted, allowing the client to stay alive, even if on death row. Reducing a death sentence meant complex hurdles.



Nick Trenticosta, former director of the Death Penalty Resource Center at Loyola University New Orleans (Courtesy of Nick Trenticosta)

As Trenticosta sought out Hamilton's relatives and others who gave sworn statements against Oberg, he included evidence never presented at either brother's trial, such as Berlin's psychiatric profile of Hamilton, referencing the priests' predatory impact on the brothers from early adolescence and the fractured family's survival.

Ironically, Trenticosta became a member of St. Peter Claver Church, where a few people remembered Oberg, long gone. If the brothers' allegations were publicized,

Trenticosta sensed, it would be a huge embarrassment for the archdiocese, and perhaps costly, given the pace of abuse lawsuits in 1998 when New Orleans, like many Catholic cities, had been rocked by scandals.

In the newly charged environment, Trenticosta sent the voluminous petition with the family's affidavits to Connick's office and to the Josephite superior in Baltimore, Fr. Joseph Verrett.

On June 5, 1998, Verrett wrote Trenticosta: "The Society's policy and procedures call for an investigation of all allegations of sexual misconduct by priests and brothers of the society, regardless of the source of allegation. ... I ask that you allow me to interview Mr. Hamilton and the other witnesses." He proposed a meeting with himself, Trenticosta and "our attorney, Tom Dame."

Trenticosta told them to do their own investigation.

As the date neared for Trenticosta's 1998 hearing, he called a friend, Sr. Helen Prejean, noted for her activism against the death penalty. Prejean lived in New Orleans where her religious order, the Congregation of St. Joseph, had a community.

Trenticosta said: "I explained the situation, suggesting she call [retired] Archbishop Hannon, who might then call Harry Connick. I don't know who said what to whom, but when I arrived for the hearing, the DA's office requested a continuance, and the judge concurred."

The continuance meant a trial whenever the prosecutors decided. Instead, the case hung in limbo for decades. And Trenticosta kept his client alive.

Hamilton spent more than 30 years in solitary confinement. "Boring as hell," he said in the Zoom interview. "At the same time, you're wondering — how you gonna fight, you know, to save your life. ... These people was going to try to execute me."

In 2021, Trenticosta got Hamilton out of solitary confinement and into a general population dorm after the legislature passed a law, sponsored by the state district attorneys, seeking authority to modify any conviction or sentence. Prosecutors and legislators realized that too many Louisiana inmates had overly harsh sentences.



The entrance sign to Louisiana State Penitentiary is seen in October 2025. (Wikimedia Commons)

In his Zoom interview, Hamilton said he never stopped believing in God. "Matter of fact, when I came off of that [death] row back in Oct. 14, 2021, and they put me at Camp C, well, they baptized me in the chapel back there. ... I got baptized when I was out there in the free world way back in 1969, I was 9 years old."

For a while, Hamilton and Joseph were in the same dormitory, but Hamilton said authorities put them in separate dorms because they were convicted of the same crime. He said they have written to each other.

Joseph has spent 38 years behind bars, most of that time at Angola. In early 2005, with the help of a jailhouse lawyer, he worked on a handwritten block letter lawsuit to a federal court, pro-se or self-represented, against then-Archbishop Alfred Hughes and former Archbishop Hannan. The pleading was swiftly rejected with prejudice, meaning he could not resubmit. He named no federal officials or institutions as defendants. On March 24, 2005, he resubmitted the petition to Orleans Parish

Criminal District Court, which also dismissed it for lack of jurisdiction — a civil case.

Joseph finally got to sue the church when he learned of the change in state law opening the "look-back window" for plaintiffs; some 660 alleged survivors have claims against the New Orleans Archdiocese in its long bankruptcy. Joseph's document formed the backbone for the proof of claims that attorney Schubert filed on his behalf. Joseph's handwritten pleading is autobiographical.

For years, he thought Oberg was dead. He asks for an attorney to obtain "very confidential records of the late Fr. Oberg" from the archdiocese. A 15-page handwritten personal history gives graphic detail of how and when Oberg abused him from boyhood forward. Then, switching to third person about himself, Joseph writes that on May 13, 2004, "the plaintiff actually then made an attempt to hang himself," and "now must continue his daily consumption of antidepressant medication."

Joseph's proof of claim is quite clear that Oberg introduced him to McCarthy when he was "15 or 16" and McCarthy "performed oral sex on me approximately once or twice a month ... until his death."

Oberg is not on the New Orleans Archdiocese's public listing of "credibly accused." The Josephite religious order has no listing of proven predators on its website. Oberg's name does not appear on BishopAccountability website's capsule biographies of 18 Josephites trailed by allegations.

Related: New Orleans Archdiocese bankruptcy pulls abuse survivor into prolonged ordeal

Whatever investigation the Josephites may have done on the allegations Trenticosta gave them in his 1998 dossier, Oberg's assignments after Joseph's trial sailed along at Josephite parishes for African Americans.

From 1988 to 1991, he served at Sacred Heart Church in Port Arthur, Texas; 1991 to 1992, at Our Mother of Mercy in Beaumont, Texas. He subsequently moved to Birmingham, Alabama, as pastor of Our Lady of Fatima, where he served until 2005, earning praise from parishioners for his stewardship and pastoral guidance.

For the last several years, he has been rector of the community for elderly Josephites, now in Washington, D.C. His two telephone numbers listed on the

Josephite website did not have voicemail to take messages about an interview.

In a phone interview, Bishop John Ricard, superior of the Josephites, said that Oberg was ill and unavailable to talk.

After Ricard requested time to review the Josephites' files, he sent this statement three weeks later:

"I am confident in our ongoing determination that we have all the facts regarding Fr. Paul Oberg, regarding the arrest, conviction, and sentencing of Marcus Hamilton and his half-brother Bernard Joseph. With the help of private investigators and through comprehensive interviews with all involved, the Josephites conducted a fully exhaustive review. We continue to hold Marcus Hamilton and his half-brother Bernard Joseph in our prayers for healing."

But Trenticosta has a different view of Oberg. He told NCR: "If it were not for Oberg, and the sexual trauma of those boys being abused by priests, Father McCarthy would have died of old age. Oberg is the reason McCarthy's dead. That's what I believe."

Read this next: Confronting abuse cases in Dallas, survivors and Jesuits take path of reconciliation

Editor's note: *This is Part 2 of a series, to be published over the coming weeks, on abuse survivors in the New Orleans Archdiocese's long bankruptcy proceeding. Read Part 1 here. The Fund for Investigative Journalism supported this series.*

Investigative reporting at NCR is made possible in part by the generosity of Annette Lomont.

This story appears in the **The Reckoning** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 19, 2025-Jan. 15, 2026** print issue under the headline: Two half-brother, in prison for killing a priest, tell a story of abuse.