



michael john eremia, m.s.w.

**CONFIDENTIAL**

May 18, 1994

Mr. Rueben Guterrez  
Deputy Probation Officer  
Santa Barbara County Probation  
117 E. Carrillo Street  
Santa Barbara, CA 93101

**COPY**

Re: Robert Van Handel

Dear Mr. Guterrez:

I am writing on behalf of the above-named client, a self-confessed child molester currently detained at the IRC facility of Santa Barbara County Jail while awaiting sentencing. Please accept the following clinical evaluation and recommendations for your review and consideration.

Mr. Van Handel, a 5'9" tall Caucasian male weighing 156 lbs., with brown eyes, balding with brown hair, is a Franciscan priest whose meek demeanor, hunched stance, and soft-spoken voice reflect his self-reports of feelings of humiliation, guilt and inadequacy. Even while acknowledging his own capacity for being manipulative, this prisoner comes across as a kind, empathic, intelligent, and passive man. His general attitude and behavior during the twice weekly sessions since April 12 have been characterized by cooperativeness, anxiety, displays of remorse and self-pity, and--at times--despair.

The quality of Mr. Van Handel's speech suggests he is struggling for control over unwanted feelings of helplessness. While speaking spontaneously, clearly and coherently, the rate of flow indicates he is carefully thinking through his thoughts and verbal productions in an effort to reduce his anxieties about imprisonment, while making certain the interviewer obtains needed information. The client readily acknowledged that one of the most anxiety-inducing aspects of imprisonment for him is the loss of control over management of his daily life. Jail time has heightened his self-acknowledged exaggerated control needs by frustrating his abilities to function freely in society. All of Mr. Van Handel's speech has been relevant in content, with no evidence of loss of goal idea, thought blocking, or circumstantial responses.

His primary mood is depression, currently controlled by a daily intake of 25 mg. of Zoloft, reportedly prescribed by the County Jail psychiatrist, Dr. Howard Babus. Additionally, the prisoner is administered 100 mg. of Nortriptylene to reduce his bedtime anxieties and make sound sleep possible. During the

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interview sessions, Mr. Van Handel, appearing preoccupied, frequently moves his right hand across his forehead or touches the back of his neck in an apparent effort to calm or reassure himself as he discloses his life history and daily activities, thoughts and moods. The telling and re-telling of personal details of his life and anti-social behavior has been both anxiety-provoking and depressing for this man.

The onset, duration, and intensity of his depression have an escalating history dating back to 1983 when he sought private therapy with Gerald White, Ph.D., clinical psychologist. At that time, thoughts of suicide were strong and pervasive enough to cause chronic loss of sleep. Currently, obsessive thoughts about suicide do recur, but the client states he would not act on those thoughts and does not view himself as suicidal. In his presentation of self, Mr. Van Handel gave no evidence of complaints or overconcern with his physical health or body functioning. Nor did he display the symptomatic expression of ruminative thinking--repeated thoughts at the abstract ideational level. Such thinking is found in those sex offenders who are either pre-schizophrenic, in a state of denial, or simply trying to distract the interviewer--none of which apply to this client. There is some evidence of echolalia, or perseverated thinking, in Mr. Van Handel's repetitive references to his conviction that he is "a failure with nothing to live for." The client produced no thoughts or verbalizations which suggested delusions, hallucinations, or paranoid ideas of reference in which he felt he was being victimized into behaving in anti-social ways.

His description of his life history, the anti-social acts he committed, and his current mood and thoughts reveal a man of above average intelligence. He is oriented to time, place, persons and circumstances in uniformly appropriate ways. Mr. Van Handel makes good eye contact and speaks softly in measured, deliberate tones, both when speaking spontaneously and when responding to inquiries. His verbal and non-verbal communications about himself and his role indicate an awareness that he is responsible for his past compulsive actions. The client questioned whether or not he was engaging in selective perception and recall when describing interactions with minors from 1987 until 1992. He displayed good remote memory in recalling his early childhood, adult life from 1965 to 1983, and good immediate memory describing events from 1992 to the present.

Mr. Van Handel made it clear that he wanted full disclosure of his acting-out history as a step in controlling his pedophilic tendencies. He said he fully recognized that his full and candid disclosures increased the risk of additional or maximum sentencing versus the possibility of parole and outpatient treatment. However, he feels full disclosures to the best of his ability to

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recall has a therapeutic effect which outweighs the risk factor associated with the actual sentencing.

Accordingly, he furnished the following personal history. The client states he was born to an American father stationed in the military and a British colonial mother in Georgetown, Guyana, on April 2, 1947. His parents had met in Guyana during World War II, when the territory was known as British Guiana. The couple married and moved to Wisconsin where Mr. Van Handel's mother gave birth to his older sister, Sandra. His mother became depressed to the point the family returned to what is now known as Guyana. His sister, Christine, was born there April 14, 1945, and two years later he arrived on the scene. In 1949 the entire family returned to Wisconsin and began a series of moves to various military bases. By the time he was seven years old, he had lived in Kimberly, Wisconsin, Fort Wayne, Indiana, Buffalo, New York, and Atlanta, Georgia. Mr. Van Handel's father was an Air Force officer working in various Air Force finance offices.

The family moved from Van Nuys to Inglewood--then to Buena Park. When he was 6 or 7 years old (1953-54), the client states, he got in trouble for pulling down the pants of another boy. His family lived comfortably since the father worked both as a real estate appraiser and as a savings and loan officer. In 1956 the family settled in Buena Park where Mr. Van Handel attended St. Pious V Catholic Elementary School from 5th through 8th grades. Significant childhood memories during grade school years, which proved to be anxiety provoking, centered around authority figures. He recalls feeling confused and upset by having his genitals examined by a physician.

Interactions with his father were difficult and often frightening. Describing his father as having "a terrible temper due to his alcoholism," the client recalls resenting the rigid, authoritarian parenting the family was subjected to. He said his father "ruined" the good times most families took for granted. Robert was forced, as a child, to pick weeds on Saturdays, not allowed to watch TV on school nights. Father was described as "arrogant, self-centered, cheap, melancholy and concerned with religious show." Mr. Van Handel stated he was prone to being guarded around his father who would not tolerate any look of dissatisfaction on the faces of any of his children. There was to be no disagreement with any of his decrees, no back-talk, and no spontaneous dissent. His younger brother, Peter, was born in 1956. The youngest sibling, David, was born in 1958, as the family continued its traditional and routine rituals of obedience to father and mandatory church attendance.

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During his four years at Pious V Elementary School, Robert states he was a B student who was fearful of his parents. He described his mother as critical and emotionally distant. She would wring her hands when upset and say things like, "You lazy boy," "I'm going to wring your ears," or "I'm going to knock your block off." When his father was upset, the sound of his raised voice made Robert try to get out of his way as quickly as possible or to literally hide. When he was in the 8th grade, his father read him a Catholic sex education book. This proved to be a traumatic experience for him, because his sisters witnessed this happening and laughed at him during and after each forced reading.

Upon his graduation from Pious V at age 14, the family sent him to St. Anthony's Seminary in Santa Barbara to continue his education. The client stated that he wanted and welcomed the experience of getting away from his family. His father urged him by stating, "You really ought to try it." Robert declared he liked the seminary high school experience but found languages and math difficult. It was a very structured program. A lot of his friends in the high school left prematurely because of the rigidity of the academic program. He experienced anxiety when four of his friends were expelled for talking to girls. At age 15 his anxiety and confusion escalated when he was molested by an alcoholic priest at the seminary. The allegedly offending priest was unnamed but was identified as the vice-principal of the school.

According to Mr. Van Handel, the priest entered his room, pulled down his pajamas, rubbed his chest until he got an erection, then played with Robert's genitals for about 10 minutes. Robert states he was embarrassed and ashamed but didn't know who to talk to about the trauma. The priest reportedly told him "the rubbing exercise" was designed to make him perspire and thereby rid him of his "fever." The client states he was confused by the experience which did not affect his academic or social performance at the seminary. Throughout his high school years he was perceived and treated by peers and faculty as "boyishly naive."

During these years (1961-1965), his temperamental, alcoholic father visited him once a month, usually alone, because his mother suffered from car sickness. While he welcomed the infrequent visits by both parents, he was apprehensive when his father came alone. Every summer the family rented a cabin near Big Bear. Robert spent the summers from 1961 to 1965 struggling with nighttime wet dreams and guilt stemming from the foreboding warnings, "Try not to enjoy it" he read in a book written by a conservative Catholic. Upon his graduation from the high school at the seminary in 1965, he took a neighborhood girl, [REDACTED] to a movie theater. It was memorable because it was his first and

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last date, ending with a kissless "goodnight."

That fall he entered San Luis Rey College, a Franciscan seminary near Oceanside, California. He, like other seminarians whose parents couldn't subsidize them, was required to pay his own tuition. After his father was laid off, Robert began to work full-time during the summer in order to pay for his college tuition for his final two years. In his second year at San Luis Rey, fellow seminarians began to confide in one another about the frequency of their masturbation. Robert states he was "amazed" by the revelation and began to fantasize interchangeably about having sex with boys and women. He realized in 1966 for the first time that the sexual attraction to children was real after he saw a picture of a young boy swimming while in an inner tube. The client states he was aroused and startled by the experience of being aroused. When he questioned a fellow seminarian regarding his classmates' reaction to the same picture and got a neutral response, he felt uneasy at his own reaction of arousal.

From 1966 through 1969, he developed and cultivated an intense interest in music. In retrospect, he realizes he was sublimating his sexual interest into the world of music. After graduation in 1969 from the college at San Luis Rey with a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, Mr. Van Handel spent the summer of 1969 in Oregon. In Corvallis he worked at the Children's Farm Home as a child care worker. The client states he shared a caseload of older teenagers with [REDACTED] with whom he shared a non-sexual relationship for three months. According to him, there were no acting-out episodes on his part during this period. From there, he was transferred to the Franciscan Novitiate in Sacramento where he worked at St. Patrick's Children's Home as a child care worker during the period of August 15, 1969 to August 16, 1970. No offenses were perpetrated, he declares, in this time period.

In September 1970 he enrolled in the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California and pursued theological studies there until October 1973. During this time he started a boys' choir and found himself attracted to the young boys in the choir. During October 1973 he was sent to Oxford University in England, University of Freiburg in Germany, and then to Cambridge University to continue his graduate studies in theology. Mr. Van Handel states he was shocked and aroused by the open display of pictures of nude children and sex between children and adults in many magazines for sale in European cities.

He returned from Europe during the summer of 1974 and went to Phoenix, Arizona at the direction of his Provincial in order to enter an internship as a church deacon. Robert worked in a

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parochial school teaching singing for six months. He states he was attracted to a young boy at the school but did not act-out because of the attraction. This child, approximately 9 years old, fit the profile of so many of Mr. Van Handel's subsequent victims, he declared. He was slight, slender and appeared helpless. When encouraged to describe his own attitudes, behavior and appearance at a similar stage of psychosexual development, Mr. Van Handel wept and stated he recalls feeling frightened and needing reassurance but not knowing how to ask for it. There was a lack of comforting touching from parents.

In the spring of 1975, he completed his graduate work in Theology in Berkeley where he resumed working with the Boys' Choir which he started. On May 17, 1975, he was ordained a Franciscan priest at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. His plan and goal was to enter the graduate program in Education at U.C. Berkeley where he had applied and was accepted for admission. Robert stated he was bitterly disappointed and upset when the Provincial would not let him attend. Instead, he was sent--over his protest--to St. Anthony's Seminary in Santa Barbara. His dislike for the assignment was immediate and pervasive, and he cited several reasons for his reaction to St. Anthony's.

First, the staff had been depleted with the departure of teachers for financial and personal reasons. Mr. Van Handel was given the work of two former instructors in his first year as a teacher. Secondly, the academic climate, as well as the social milieu, had changed since he was a student at the school in the early 1960's. The stress was severe, because the student body had changed from predominantly well-mannered Caucasian children willing to pursue rigorous academic studies to a mixture of lower income minorities who refused to study Latin and Greek, and generally behaved in an unruly manner, according to him. The curriculum had changed from classical to modern, and he was not really equipped to provide first-class teaching in math and science.

Mr. Van Handel remained a teacher at St. Anthony's from 1975 until 1985. He says that the combination of his attraction to children and his frustration with work led him in 1976 to succumb to the temptation to photograph children in the nude and to tickle them. He stated this activity was self-reinforcing, because no one resisted or complained. Further, he assumed their parents knew but didn't care about what he viewed as harmless fun at the time. Mr. Van Handel appeared eager to stress that he was never naked with any of the boys, never masturbated in front of them, and never had oral sex with any of them. At the same time, he did acknowledge that he did derive sexual gratification from these activities which took place from 1975 until 1983. He named [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] as the six young-  
sters who were recipients of his molest activities during that  
eight-year period.

These activities ceased, the client states, when he saw a 1983 article in the L.A. Times documenting the arrest of the director of the California Boys' Choir on charges of molestation. Mr. Van Handel consulted Jerry White, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, for about six months in 1983 and in 1987 to cope with his suicidal depression over the realization that he could be facing similar charges one day. He says he did not reveal to Dr. White the etiology of his depression, because he was aware of reporting requirements therapists are bound by in all cases of child abuse. After terminating his therapy with Dr. White, he began to take [REDACTED] an eight-year-old choir member, under his wing. The client states he did so because [REDACTED] mother was "unreliable and unpredictable." Robert took [REDACTED] into his apartment on those occasions from 1984 through 1989 when his mother was unavailable or did not show up after choir. She was a single, working mother.

According to Mr. Van Handel, [REDACTED] requested a backrub before going to bed, and this request was accommodated from 1987 through 1989. Over a three-year period, [REDACTED] was given help with homework and meals. This was culminated with nightly massages which included "inappropriate touching." In describing this aspect of his history, Robert stated that he has "a lot of terrible fears about the potential damage done." He wept as he described the personal history he wrote for the District Attorney. His explicit sexual history was outlined in a journal written specifically for his therapist, Mary Simoni, at Pacific Treatment Center in Santa Cruz. He was at the Center from August 1993 until March 1994 when he was arrested and brought to Santa Barbara County to face child sex abuse charges. The arrest interrupted a painful but effective therapeutic program which can document significant gains in controlling his latent pedophilia, he states.

The client reviewed his prior in-patient and out-patient treatment at St. Luke's Institute in Maryland. He received in-patient care from June 3, 1992 until January 15, 1993, and out-patient care from January 16, 1993 until July 15, 1993 at St. Luke's. This resulted after the family of [REDACTED] (no relation to [REDACTED]) wrote to his Provencial, alleging sexual improprieties took place between their son and Father Van Handel at the priest's initiative. Mr. Van Handel states that when he switched to the out-patient program which features art therapy as well as individual and group therapy, he got in touch with his anger at his father. In art therapy sessions, he experienced fears of monsters he was drawing as he visualized his father's face on

the completed drawings. In August 1993, his Provincial made him return to California to enter the Pacific Treatment Program for sex offenders in Santa Cruz. This client states agency records will substantiate that his sexual urges and interests were eradicated as a result of intramuscular injections of Depo Provera used in conjunction with traditional therapies, and that he no longer poses a threat to children.

The following responses to questions posed provide clues to his current state of mind.

- (1) WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST CONCERN OR FEAR AT THIS TIME?  
The actual and potential damage I've done to the young men, the Friars, and the Catholic Church. I'm also afraid I won't overcome my feeling of failure and that I'll never be able to function as a priest.
- (2) IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE BOTHERING YOU?  
I feel that I have nothing to live for--that everything will be horrible from here on in. I feel I'm a big embarrassment to the Friars, the Church, and to my family. I feel an anguish over the people I've harmed. I'm bothered by the fact there's nothing I can do or say to make amends that would make a difference in their lives. I don't understand how the Friars, my family, and so many other people can be so extraordinarily supportive of me.
- (3) WHAT DO YOU VISUALIZE AS THE WORST CASE SCENARIO FACING YOU?  
Having the District Attorney's office copy and circulate the sexual history I produced for my therapist, Mary Simoni, at the Pacific Treatment Center. It's a confidential medical document for use in therapy. The journal contains the names of three women I've had sex with--and their identities need to be protected. I'm just waiting for the News-Press to get a copy of the journal and identify me as just another of society's monsters, while naming those female partners who are adults. I couldn't handle that.
- (4) WHY SHOULD YOU BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY FROM ANY OTHER SEX OFFENDER?  
I don't expect to be treated differently. I do know that I am different from others labelled pedophile, because I've had sex with adults of the opposite sex. I also know that the treatment was working. The Depo Provera eliminated my drive and interests. I'm depressed at having lost the benefits of the group therapy program at Santa Cruz. The court has all those records, but I'm prepared for the social price of my actions and fully expect a jail sentence, regardless of the



psychiatrist's report or any recommendation made by you.

- (5) WHAT GAINS DID YOU MAKE DURING INTENSIVE TREATMENT AT ST. LUKE'S AND PACIFIC TREATMENT CENTER WHICH LEAD YOU TO BELIEVE YOU COULD BE CONSIDERED FOR IMMEDIATE PAROLE AND RETURN TO OUT-PATIENT TREATMENT?

The main things are the awareness of my anger, the ability to express my feelings including anger, and the fact I'm not aroused physically by an erotic stimulus--like a picture or a recording--as long as I'm on Depo Provera. I was putting the pieces together at the time of my arrest by learning not to lie in order to cover up my fears. I feel very badly that I lied to the staff at St. Lukes's.

- (6) WHAT IS THE BEST CASE SCENARIO YOU VISUALIZE IN THE SENTENCING PROCESS?

A full year in jail with lengthy probation and parole, along with a return to mandatory, intensive treatment. I'm fearful of losing contact with my therapist, Mary Simoni, at Pacific Treatment Center if sent to State prison. I'd certainly welcome sessions with you if I'm sentenced to County Jail. The contact does help.

- (7) WHAT IS THE HARDEST PART OF BEING BEHIND BARS?

The painful realization I'm a convicted felon. I wake up numb to my feelings until I start talking to you. I'm in hideous pain here and expect it to get worse. My energy is focused on fighting self-pity, because it's counter-productive. I'm acknowledging real feelings of despair, but I can't let those feelings push me into a state of total helplessness. Whatever happens, happens, and I'll have to learn to develop the strength to deal with it. (Long silence and tears) ...The alternative is suicide.

- (8) WHY SUICIDE?

The most difficult part of incarceration is the recurrent, intrusive feelings of remorse and guilt over the actual molestations. When you're not in the therapy situation on a day-to-day basis, it's hard to digest those feelings. (Tears) ...I recognize I've done wrong and harmed people in the past, but there's been nothing since 1989. I understand why people are angry with me, and I accept their right to be angry. What I don't understand is why people are so unforgiving and vindictive.

- (9) ASSUMING YOUR BEST CASE SCENARIO DOES MATERIALIZE, WHAT PLANS, HOPES OR GOALS DO YOU HOPE TO PURSUE AFTER ONE YEAR IN JAIL?  
All of my work in studying for the priesthood turned out to be

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in vain. There is nothing that I aspire to. I would like to return to San Juan Baptista Retreat House and function as a bookkeeper. That way I can resume my therapy at Pacific Treatment Center in Santa Cruz. Their program is more confrontational than the program at St. Luke's. One thing is certain. With the insights I've gained and my status as a convicted felon, I will not put myself in a situation where a temptation to re-offend can occur.

- (10) DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE OTHER ALTERNATIVES IN THE EVENT YOU ARE GRANTED IMMEDIATE PAROLE WITHOUT SERVING ADDITIONAL TIME IN JAIL?

My other option is to stay with the Franciscans and work at the Archive Library in the American Academy of Franciscan History in Berkeley, California. But really, I'd like to hide in the retreat at San Juan Baptista. (Silence and tears. Client began to tremble.) ...I don't think I can make it outside of the Franciscan order.

- (11) WHAT MAKES YOU BELIEVE THAT?

It doesn't take much for me to think about suicide. The idea seems so attractive to the cowardly side of me. I think the thoughts of suicide are attractive because it gives me the feeling of control. I don't do well when I'm not in control; I get really depressed. In jail you're under the control of people doing the job they're paid to do. They're not paid to have concern for or awareness of individual prisoners.

- (12) WHY SHOULD ANYONE GIVE CONSIDERATION TO A RECOMMENDATION FOR PAROLE WITH NO ADDITIONAL JAIL TIME?

As I said, I haven't committed any offenses since 1989 and have been very committed to the treatment programs at St. Luke's and Santa Cruz. While I appreciate such a recommendation because I know I'm no risk to children now, I have no realistic expectation that the judge would act on such a recommendation. As much as I'm terrified of it, I'm prepared for a State prison sentence.

- (13) WHY?

I have real enemies in Santa Barbara--the people I've molested and their families. (Tears).....I felt like an animal when

came into this facility and gave me hard, cold stares. I would expect the judge to make his decision based on all of the statements made by everyone affected by my actions, and not just by the many statements of support I've received.

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As you can see from the foregoing responses, Mr. Van Handel, despite his vulnerability and desperation in the jail setting, maintains his stance of accepting responsibility for his acts. He has an exaggerated negative self-image, stating he cannot accept compliments or positive statements about himself from any source. This client exhibits many of the distinctive characteristics seen in sex offenders. His self-reports and personal history reveal a basic inadequate personality. He is easily discouraged and displays a propensity for wanting to give up or quit because he feels he has nothing to live for. There is evidence of selective perception in his descriptions of recent history, although he gives his accusers the benefit of the doubt and states they "must be right" because they can remember things he cannot. His exaggerated control needs, when thwarted, reinforce his pre-existing feelings of helplessness and depression.

Mr. Van Handel is non-assertive and exhibits pervasive guilt along with his subjective judgment that his life would be unmanageable outside of the Franciscan order. He acknowledges that his peer interactions and interpersonal relations with adults outside of the Franciscan Order have been poor. From childhood, where he lived in a repressive environment, this client displaced his suppressed emotions through fantasy and, eventually, inappropriate sexual acting-out. Deviant arousal patterns and distorted sexual values propelled him obsessively-compulsively to engage in sexual activities with minors under his control from 1975 through 1989. The fourteen year history of acting-out suggests cleverness in concealing his pedophilia while dealing with the community relating to St. Anthony's Seminary and the Santa Barbara Boy's Choir. Thus, Mr. Van Handel's capacity for manipulative behavior should not be underestimated.

Despite these well documented traits, he has abstained from sexual contacts with children during the past five years. Additionally, this client has a very high level of motivation to resume his intensive and effective therapy for the treatment of pedophilia at Pacific Treatment Center in Santa Cruz. This suggests that Robert Van Handel is a better than average candidate for immediate release and parole, despite his anticipation of a lengthy state prison term. If he is released, I believe latent pedophilic tendencies can be controlled on an out-patient basis outlined in the attached treatment protocol.

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DIAGNOSIS: Axis I 302.20 Pedophilia; Axis II 301.60 Dependent  
Personality Disorder

Yours truly,

Michael Eremia, LCSW  
Licensed Clinical Social Worker  
AASECT Certified Sex Therapist

Enclosure

cc: Robert Sanger, Attorney-at-Law  
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