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The story that won't go away

Joe Ferullo | Sep. 23, 2009 NCR Today

It has been looming over the Los Angeles archdiocese for nearly a decade, like a dark cloud that won't move on -- the priest sex abuse scandal. And another chapter in this never-ending story [1] appears in today Los Angeles Times.

Columnist Steve Lopez reports on a deposition made public last week by Msgr. Richard Loomis, in a lawsuit filed by priest abuse victims. In his testimony, Loomis asserts that, back in 2000, he pushed Los Angeles' Cardinal Roger Mahony to report to police abuse allegations made against a now-defrocked priest named Michael Baker. According to Loomis, Mahony at first agreed, then -- once he consulted with legal counsel -- decided against reporting Baker.

In a conversation with Lopez, a spokesman for the archdiocese insisted Loomis is a less-than-credible witness. That's because the monsignor -- the archdiocese's vicar of clergy who went on to become canonical investigator of sexual misconduct complaints -- is currently on leave due to allegation of, yes, sexual misconduct.

And so it has gone in largest archdiocese in America -- a years-long roller coaster ride of allegations and mitigations that shows no sign of stopping. At the head of it all is Cardinal Mahony himself, a huge figure in American Catholicism who has been a vibrant and articulate voice on issues of social justice and immigrant rights. In person, Mahony is a smart, funny, genial man who comes across as loving what he does. When the now-retired pastor of my parish celebrated his 50th anniversary as a priest last June, Mahony was there to celebrate the Mass. He then stayed to have lunch with the parish priests and several parishioners, talking easily on a range of topics, from religious education to a good restaurant in Rome near the Vatican.

Yet he has by many accounts mishandled the abuse issue from the beginning. When the stories first began to break, he built a wall of silence around himself and the archdiocese, a wall that raised more questions than it answered. Slowly, Mahony became more open on the issue, but by then the story-line had been set: the cardinal was secretive; he must have something to hide, something big.

The drip-drip-drip of stories continues. Some push Mahony to end the dripping and get it all out there, whatever the consequences. Mahony insists it is all out, that there just isn't much "there" -- and he has apologized publicly and privately for missteps he has made, for the abuse victims have faced.

The roller coaster ride will go on.

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-lopez23-2009sep23,0,5991275.column