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Cardinal Mahony testimony: 'dark and disappointing moment'

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 20, 2010

Roger Mahony (CNS photo)

It's a dark and disappointing moment for Catholics in Los Angeles -- at the request of the *Los Angeles Times*, the courts last week made public a deposition earlier this year by Cardinal Roger Mahony, in the case of former priest Michael Baker, a convicted child molestor who was shuttled around to various parishes in the 1980s.

As I've written before, Mahony is one of the good guys on some many things that matter to Catholics in California: human rights, social justice, immigration reform. But when it comes to the still-growing sex abuse scandal, he seems to be just another person-in-power looking first to protect the church's reputation.

In the deposition, Mahony acknowledges that Baker (who is now serving ten years in prison for molestation) came to him and confessed his actions. The cardinal sent the priest off to a "treatment center" used by the church, and then the church swung him around to several parishes - including some with elementary schools.

Reports of abuse by Baker continued but nothing more was done.

In his column in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* [1], Steve Lopez excerpts this moment from the deposition):

Manly (attorney): I mean you would agree that the first thing any priest should do... when you learn that a priest has molested a child is call the police, right?

Mahony: Not neccessarily.

The most disappointing feature of the exchange is Mahony's fall-back to what has become a standard defense: he did what everyone was doing at the time, believing "treatment" could find a cure. Don't judge my actions back then, Mahony says, by today's rules.

True enough in concept -- and yet. We are talking about 1986, not 1689 ... and I am not sure there is any moment in history you can find where society's mores would make it all right for a priest to molest a child, get a slap on the wrist, and then be placed with children again. It happened -- it happened a lot because people sought to protect themselves, those they knew, and the institution that gave them power.

But it was never right.

Where does Mahony go from here? He had one year left in his long service as cardinal and archbishop -- a service that is filled with high marks and selfless service. But the scandal and his response to it threatens to define him as it has some many other church leaders. Time is running out to fix it.

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