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Editorial: In Los Angeles, a victory for truth

by NCR Editorial Staff

LA abuse cases

Editorial

To those familiar with the protocols of the Catholic hierarchy, the news was stunning. The archbishop of Los Angeles publicly rebuked his predecessor, a cardinal, for his failures in dealing with the priest sex abuse scandal.

The action by Archbishop Jose Gomez, relieving Cardinal Roger Mahony of "any administrative or public duties," was remarkable on two levels.

First, it broke with the unspoken but nearly ironclad rule of the culture of Catholic hierarchy that bishops do not publicly criticize other bishops. That courtesy extended even to the most egregious examples of ecclesial malfeasance -- the deliberate and persistent hiding of criminal activities by priests. No one to this point had uttered a word against a predecessor, not in New York or Connecticut, not in Philadelphia or Milwaukee, not in Seattle or Santa Fe. There were "mistakes made," they would say, and offer vacuous apologies. For whatever reasons yet unknown, Gomez broke the code.

Second, the language Gomez used was blunt and unqualified. The behavior he found in the files, he said, was "evil." The acts themselves and the handling of these matters, as the files revealed, showed more than mistakes made, they showed a "terrible failure."

"I find these files to be brutal and painful reading. The behavior described in these files is terribly sad and evil. There is no excuse, no explaining away what happened to these children. The priests involved had the duty to be their spiritual fathers and they failed," wrote Gomez, who also referred to Mahony's sorrow "for his failure to fully protect young people entrusted to his care."

Gomez's words are a direct contradiction of the weak defense that Mahony has advanced for years, all the

while spending untold sums in attempts to keep the truth hidden. It is the same list of explanations that he repeated in a lengthy and testy response to Gomez's statement. "Nothing in my own background or education equipped me to deal with this grave problem," Mahony wrote. In studying for his master's degree in social work, he said, no lecture or textbook ever referred to the sexual abuse of children.

There is, of course, some truth to the "we didn't know" defense. Few knew, years ago, the seriousness of the disease borne by those who molest children. Much of it remains a mystery today.

But the "we didn't know" defense quickly wears thin against the details contained in the 12,000 pages of documents recently released by the court in Los Angeles, just as it wore thin against the truth revealed when documents were released in other places like Philadelphia and Boston.

That's why Mahony spent so much time and money over nearly a decade attempting to keep the documents sealed. It's why, even after agreeing to release documents as part of a 2007 settlement with 508 victims costing \$660 million, he continued to fight tooth and nail to keep the documents secret. It is why he and the diocese's lawyers tried a last-ditch and ultimately failed attempt to get the courts to redact the names of church officials from the documents so it would be difficult to tell who did what. The documents put the lie to the "we didn't know" defense.

What they demonstrate -- and we have yet to read through all the thousands of pages -- is that diocesan officials, while they may not have understood the intricacies of the sex abuser's mind and motivation, did know laws were being broken, children were being raped and otherwise abused. They knew they had to take extraordinary lengths -- sending priests to counselors who were also lawyers so they could claim their conversations were privileged, sending some priests out of the country and others from parish to parish and diocese to diocese -- to avoid detection by the law and by the very Catholic community the officials were charged to serve. They knew enough to understand they had to hide the crimes and the behavior if they didn't want to besmirch the good name of the clergy culture. Consideration of what was happening to the abused children and their families was incidental, at best.

What Mahony and others -- Cardinals Bernard Law, Justin Rigali, Edward Egan, Anthony Bevilacqua, and a host of archbishops and bishops -- really didn't understand was the degree to which their moral compasses had been distorted by the strong magnetic pull of the clergy culture. In their fierce allegiance to that exclusive club at all costs, in their willingness to preserve the façade of holiness and the faithful's high notion of ordination, they lost sight of simple human decency and the most fundamental demands of the Gospel.

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It doesn't take a master's or a doctorate to understand that the first obligation of adults is to protect the children. When the first instinct became protection of the clergy and the institution, our leaders became disfigured at some deep and essential level. The Catholic community is still waiting for them to deal honestly with that reality, with what happens to them when their robes turn to purple.

Meanwhile, there are no heroes in any of this. Gomez may have broken with normal behaviors, but as many have already pointed out, he had access to the documents for two years and said nothing. And it is reasonable to expect that if Mahony and the lawyers had succeeded in keeping the documents sealed, nothing would have been said. The "evil" would have remained festering on some chancery shelf.

If Gomez really wants to do a service to the people of God in Los Angeles, he will reveal how much of

the archdiocese's treasury was spent during the last decade on trying to hide that truth. By its own admission, the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese spent \$1.39 million in a failed 18-month attempt to defend Bishop Robert Finn from charges of failing to report a child pornographer, and the Milwaukee archdiocese has spent \$9 million in a two-year-long, far-from-settled bankruptcy case precipitated by sex abuse law suits. The amount of money the Los Angeles archdiocese has spent hiding these documents must be mind-boggling. That is evil, as well.

There are no heroes among the many other chancery officials and public relations advisers and lawyers who knew, some for many years, what crimes and sins had been committed against children.

There are no heroes in the Vatican structures, on up to the pope, among those who years ago could have demanded a review of the documents, come to the same conclusions as Gomez and removed Mahony long ago. It would have saved the church of Los Angeles years of suspense and enormous amounts of money. We say we believe the truth will set us free. In too many dioceses today, the truth remains hidden and the church remains in chains fashioned by its bishops.

Endless speculation will swirl now about why Gomez did what he did and what precisely it means. None of that really matters. What matters is the truth that will outlast reporters, commentators, perpetrators, cardinals, bishops, victims and the rest. The revelation and preservation of that truth in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles just received a boost with the release of the documents.

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