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Los Angeles parishioners view documents' release, Mahony suspension with anger, sadness

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LA abuse cases
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In parishes across the Los Angeles archdiocese Sunday, priests read a letter from Archbishop Jose Gomez about the court-ordered release of documents from clergy sex abuse cases and the relieving of his predecessor, Cardinal Roger Mahony, of public duties in the archdiocese for his role.

"Reading these files, reflecting on the wounds that were caused, has been the saddest experience I've had since becoming your archbishop in 2011," Gomez said in the letter [1], made public last week.

Many Mass-goers declined to talk about the scandal, but their stoicism belied a mix of emotions among Los Angeles Catholics -- anger, sadness, relief and vindication.

"What are you going to do?" asked Walt Perry after the Saturday vigil Mass at St. Charles Borromeo Church in North Hollywood, Mahony's parish of residence since he retired in 2011. At home, Perry and his friends have photos taken with Mahony.

"What people are struggling with is that it's not so clear-cut that the cardinal is a monster," said Msgr. Robert Gallagher, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo.

Regular Mass-goers like Susan Schmidt say the church's mistakes won't shake their faith, and the recent release of documents shows only that people are fallible.

"None of us could stand the judgment of an unforgiving God," said Schmidt outside St. Charles Borromeo after the 5 p.m. Mass Saturday.

Sympathy for Mahony extended beyond his home parish. The documents state that pedophile priests served at Our Lady of Guadalupe-Rosehill, but Mahony's actions didn't fit what some parishioners knew of the cardinal.

"It's a shame that it had to come to this," said Robert Granados. He and his wife, Genevieve, had been to confession with Mahony at the cathedral. "He was progressive. He was for the people. It doesn't jive."

Genevieve said she blames wider church policies for the cover-up, but added that Mahony deserves admonishment for following directions and not his conscience.

In Santa Barbara, Marie Foley said she has felt this same mix of emotions over Bishop Thomas Curry's resignation. The documents show Curry helped cover up abuse when he was Mahony's vicar for clergy in the 1980s. Curry resigned Thursday as auxiliary bishop for the Santa Barbara region.

As part of the leadership committee of Voice of the Faithful, Foley said she has had a good amount of contact

with Curry, whom she said welcomed the reform group in the archdiocese and was well-liked.

"We felt somewhat betrayed because we didn't realize that his involvement was so deep," Foley said. "He's done much good -- and I feel the same about Mahony -- and yet they are hiding behind apologies."

Mahony posted a letter to Gomez on his blog Friday [2], saying he hadn't known better at the time but had led improvements as the church learned how to deal with sex abuse. Foley and other Catholics said claiming naivety -- even though the documents show the men knew they were covering up criminal activity -- is what angers them most.

"This current situation is too little, too late," said Barbara Gangi. As a producer who has worked with Catholic organizations, she's heard many deny that there was a cover-up. Reading the documents, she said the revelations sadden her, though she said she also feels vindicated because nobody can deny the cover-up now.

Gangi said she discovered in the documents that three priests at her childhood parish -- two of whom she knew -- had abused children.

"It makes me feel lucky that I must have dodged a bullet. But how many of my young friends didn't?" she said. "It just makes me sick."

While Gomez calls the behavior described in the documents "sad and evil," many aren't satisfied with his actions either, noting that it took a court order to release the documents.

The cover-up is specifically what turned Bryan Nellis of Santa Barbara off from the church. Once a committed Catholic, he said has explored other churches and spirituality on his own.

"[In] any profession, you're going to have a bad apple ... but this was so prolific," he said.

Latino Catholics are known for their loyalty to the church, said Stephen Chavez, a young professional from East Los Angeles, but for some progressive second- and third-generation Latinos, the sex abuse scandal "puts the nail in the coffin" for the Catholic church. His parents are devout Catholics, but Chavez only attends Mass for holidays out of a sense of tradition.

Our Lady of Guadalupe-Rosehill is filled with Latino families and small children. At the 10:30 a.m. English Mass on Sunday, the children gathered by the altar to get a front-row view. In the back corner of the small sanctuary, a poster communicates the church's promise to protect children in Spanish. But Gomez's letter wasn't read that morning, parishioners said. The pastor, Fr. Nelson Trinidad, said he read it at the Spanish Masses, but many of his parishioners simply didn't want to discuss the scandal.

Part of the problem, Chavez said, is that Latino Catholics "don't realize the extent that [sex abuse] happened in our community."

"I hope that the Latino community doesn't forget that these priests were preying on undocumented children," Chavez said.

Acknowledging the church's failures requires the laity in all communities to step up and take action, said Margaret Schettler, a supporter of the Survivors Network for Those Abused by Priests.

Schettler worked with a pedophile priest, Edward Anthony Rodrigue, in the San Bernadino diocese in the 1970s, but the diocese frustrated her efforts to find his victims in the early 2000s. Now the retired church minister volunteers to teach people how to recognize abuse through Virtus trainings [3].

The release of the documents brings Schettler both sadness and relief. Now that nobody can deny the extent of the scandal, she said she hopes the church can start grieving.

"People in the pews are really the only ones who are going to bring about the healing," she said.

[Megan Sweas is a freelance journalist based in Los Angeles.]

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[1] http://www.la-archdiocese.org/org/media/Press%20Releases/2013-0131_JHGStatement-EN.pdf
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