NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Los Angeles' Archbishop Gomez wins the Renault Shocked, Shocked Award

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Feb. 8, 2013 Bulletins from the Human Side
LA abuse cases

Archbishop Jose Gomez has earned and retired the Shocked, Shocked Award based on the response of Captain Louis Renault, played by Claude Rains in the movie "Casablanca," who, when pressed for his reasons for closing down Rick's Café, says indignantly as he is handed his winnings for the night, that he is "shocked, shocked," to learn that gambling has been going on there.

Gomez uses Renault's tones in a letter [1] relieving his predecessor, Cardinal Roger Mahony, of his administrative and public duties, professing to be shocked, shocked, to learn from the court-ordered release of files on priests that sex abuse has been going on in the archdiocese of Los Angeles.

He finds these files, he claims, "to be brutal and painful reading. ... The behavior described ... is terribly sad and evil." He writes further of Mahony's "failure to fully protect young people."

This is the same Mahony he praised when, on succeeding him in March 2011, said, "I am very grateful ... to serve the Church with a mentor and leader like Cardinal Mahony."

Mahony responded with an open letter [2] in which he notes that after Gomez became official archbishop, he was "personally involved with the Compliance Audit of 2012 ... Not once over these past years did you ever raise any questions about our policies, practices or procedures in dealing with the problem of clergy sexual misconduct involving minors."

What, one might ask, did Gomez know about sexual abuse by priests, and when did he know it? It is difficult to imagine that, having become auxiliary bishop in Denver in 2001, he did not know much about the sexual abuse scandal that exploded at the beginning of 2002 and that led to the celebrated -- or infamous, make your own choice -- meeting at Dallas in June of that year at which the bishops issued their charter, requiring all dioceses to monitor and report yearly on their activities to protect children. These reports were made in Denver as well as in San Antonio, where Gomez became archbishop in 2004.

It is hard to imagine Gomez did not learn about the San Antonio archdiocese's hosting in that year of the "Mending the Hurt Quilt" that took place, according to the archdiocesan paper [3], *Today's Catholic*, "on August 20 in the chancery atrium." The quilt had been "created by local children victimized by sexual abuse." This was initiated by his predecessor, Archbishop Patrick Flores.

If the archbishop missed that, is it possible he was unaware of the statement by Mark Carmona, executive director of the Alamo Children's Advocacy Center, that the overall number of abuse cases reported in the city in 2002 was 17,000, an average of 47 a day?

Gomez's "shocked, shocked" response may seem somewhat affected when one learns of the suit against a Fr. John M. Fiala in which Gomez was listed as one of the defendants. He is not reported to have used words like

"brutal," "painful," "sad" or "evil" or to have commented at all on this situation. Fiala was accused, according to the *San Antonio Express-News* [4], of "repeatedly sexually assaulting a 16-year-old boy, at times by gunpoint, in hotel rooms and during catechism classes." Fiala was arrested "on a charge of attempting to hire a hitman to kill the youth, now 19."

The settlement of this suit for $946,000 was announced just a few weeks before Gomez took over in Los Angeles. If Gomez, who deserves credit for removing this abuser from the priesthood in 2008, wanted to make sure this case was closed and unlikely to be brought up before his promotion to the largest archdiocese in the country and the red hat that goes with it, he succeeded by agreeing to the settlement beneath the incense-laden smokescreen laid down in the coverage of his upward move.

Gomez lets some of the wisp of that same cloud envelop his own background. According to catholic-hierarchy.org [5], he was ordained a priest of Opus Dei at the shrine of Torreciudad in Spain. According to *NCR* 's John Allen [6], Gomez has said that he is not a member of Opus Dei, but "rather that he was ordained a priest at Opus Dei, and that his spirituality reflects that background."

Gomez, now aghast at the policies of his predecessor, has, however, made no move to change them and has not stopped payment on the checks to the lawyers and insurers who continue to be involved in carrying them out.

Whether Gomez is the Renault of Catholicism or just a prelate so caught up in his Opus Dei devotions and pursuing his own ecclesiastical goals that he really missed the sex abuse scandal that has engulfed the church for a decade, his behavior in making Mahony the principal scapegoat for clerical offenses does suggest a keen sense of career timing.

He knew what he was doing when he signed off on the near-million-dollar settlement just before ascending to Los Angeles. Is he now making sure he is eligible for future honors by clearing his record by accusing the man he once identified as his mentor as now the villain in the sex abuse tragedy in Los Angeles?

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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