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Does Cardinal Mahony deserve as much understanding as Christopher Dorner?



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Mar 4, 2013

by [Eugene Cullen Kennedy](#)

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A major eastern newspaper says Cardinal Roger Mahony, retired archbishop of Los Angeles, is lucky not to be in jail after recently released archdiocesan documents were cited as evidence that he covered up many priests accused of sexually abusing those in their care, avoided reporting them to the police, and allowed them, after treatment and admonishment, to return quasi-purified to work as priests again.

Many victims with unhealed wounds from sexual abuse by priests feel that, if these allegations are true, Mahony should be barred from the forthcoming conclave to elect a new pope. Rome-based Cardinal Velasio de Paolis tells *La Repubblica*, in the tones of a godfather ordering a hit, that "persuasion" should be used on Mahony by "someone with great authority" in a "private interview" to convince him that "he should not take part" in the forthcoming election.

Mahony's successor, Archbishop Jose Gomez, claims he just learned from the recently released records -- oh, the horrors of it all -- that clerical sex abuse occurred when Mahony presided in Los Angeles. With theatrical self-righteousness, he has forbidden Mahony -- sending a "What a good boy am I" message to Rome -- to perform any sacramental functions publicly.

Worse than Gomez's apparent amnesia about the clerical sex abuse in San Antonio when he was its archbishop and his now doing everything but sending his hat size to Rome for the red one he ambitions by condemning Mahony, whom he previously termed a "mentor," was its being played against a cruelly ironic backstory. This was the swell of sympathy that rolled like a cleansing tide over mass-murderer Christopher Dorner while he was still on the run. Are we surprised that some celebrities joined the ever-pious do-gooders in a desperate effort to discover Dorner's latent nobility and to reopen the case against the Los Angeles Police Department, whose loss Dorner sought to avenge

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through killing cops and their relatives? None of these do-gooders, referred to in Chicago politics as "goo goos" because of the lint-covered lollipops of their ill-placed interventions, evinced any such interest in trying to understand or defend Mahony.

The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the recently released documents present a more subtle picture of Mahony's efforts to deal with the sexual abusers among his clergy. The documents reveal that Mahony was "impeded" in his "attempts to remove priests" from functioning by the lack of response or effective cooperation on the part of Vatican officials.

After discussing the clerical sexual abuse problem in a closed session at their spring meeting in June 1985, America's Catholic bishops, including Mahony, petitioned Rome for permission to remove proven sex abusers from the priesthood. The Vatican refused, reserving that right to the pope alone and to a Vatican bureaucracy that so frustrated Mahony that he arranged for a special meeting in Rome in December 1993 to move officials to deal with Fr. Kevin Barmasse, whose violations led Mahony to take him out of parish life.

"Given the pastoral situation in the United States today," Mahony wrote to Rome, "which is all too well known, Bishops need to be able to act quickly and decisively in cases of alleged clerical misconduct to assure the People of God that their rights are being fully protected."

Nothing happened, and Mahony wrote again to the Vatican official with whom he had been dealing: "It is almost five months since my meeting with you and nothing further has come from you or your Congregation."

Mahony also wrote to the Vatican about Philippine native Fr. Arwyn Diesta, asking, "How many other young men have been needlessly subjected to sex abuse by Father

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Diesta since he was reported -- 10 years ago?" In April 2002, after the first in a worldwide chain reaction of explosions of clerical sex abuse scandals detonated in America, Diesta's Phillipine bishop still defended him, and Mahony continued to try to have him removed from the priesthood in which, according to the *Times*, he remains to this day.

Mahony, along with other American bishops, was consistently frustrated in his efforts to direct Vatican attention to this serious problem. Even after then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger took over in 2001 to reorganize the process of handling cases at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, resources allotted to this were pitifully small.

These efforts by Mahony and others to stir Rome to action on this problem have hardly ever been written about, largely because of the enormity of the still-unsettled crisis and the still not fully comprehended suffering that sex-abusing priests and religious visited on the innocents whose vulnerability was raised exponentially by the trust they invested in these supposed servants of God.

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That people felt more sympathy for the vicious Dorner than for the beleaguered Mahony may in part be a function of the still-unmeasured depth and breadth of sex abuse in the church. Is it equally ironic that in the Los Angeles suburb that is the center of the motion picture industry, celebrities such as Polish film director Roman Polanski, who fled the country in 1977 after he was accused of mixing champagne and tranquilizers in seducing a girl under 14 into having sex with him, was later publicly defended by such luminaries as

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Martin Scorsese, David Lynch and Woody Allen, who has had his own problems with sex with young girls. French cultural minister Frederic Mitterrand defended Polanski, who held French citizenship, after he was subsequently arrested in Switzerland, describing him as a great artist "who has had a hard life" but is "a wonderful man."

Hollywood's approach to scandalous involvement by stars has always paralleled that of the culture in general before the relatively recent discovery of the suffering of victims, shunted aside for generations and often accused of provoking the behavior in question. Studios deployed teams of lawyers, press agents and physicians to minimize, if not eliminate, bad publicity, to remove the star, regarded as an asset to be protected, from the scene, to arrange for treatment at some discreet location and to return the actor to work without the public's knowing anything about it.

The same procedures were followed in all the professions when they reigned at the top of the now-collapsed social hierarchy of American life. If a doctor or a judge made a pass at a caddy at the golf club, the culture supported the professional and accepted the same careful protection of the professional's reputation; the victims, often from a lower social class, were damned while the professional, like the movie star, was removed to a treatment facility and, in the reigning cultural paradigm, returned to work as quickly and quietly as possible.

Rescue parties were also dispatched to rescue professional athletes in danger of drifting out to sea on the ice floe of scandalous behavior. They were residents of the highest level of culture, and it is hardly surprising the clergy received the standard special treatment given to other professionals. It was what the lawyers, insurers and therapists recommended. Get compromised professionals off the scene, get them treated, get them back to work. This code of saving the privileged was broken when the culture

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at large began to understand the suffering of victims and to recognize their rights to be treated as human beings rather than as problems to be solved by whatever means worked.

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The bishops have learned the hard way that this once-accepted cultural template is broken and, however late they have come to a realization of the human damage wrought by sex-abusing priests, they have made an attempt to change course and to understand that what society once accepted as standing operating procedure for the privileged cannot be applied, despite the contrary advice of their lawyers and insurers, to the sexual abuse of children by priests.

When we studied American priests for the nation's Catholic bishops at Loyola University of Chicago many years ago, we learned that an alarming subset of priests were not psychosexually mature. Their chronological age was one thing; their inner age of development was quite another. Not only did many sexual abusers arise from this troubled cohort, but it became evident that priests such as these were highly skilled at manipulating others. That intuitive talent enabled them to abuse children shamefully and to abuse their bishops and other superiors shamelessly with their lies, promises of repentance and recidivism for sexually abusing minors.

It seems like heresy to suggest that Catholic bishops, many of whom seem to have handled the sex abuse problem with a naïve confidence in treatment and redemption, were themselves abused by the priests, a small bedeviled group compared to the thousands of good ones, who were highly skilled at getting just what they wanted out of innocent children and, in another sense, from bishops as well. Priest abusers were easily able to arrange their schedules, despite their complaints about tough superiors, so they had the freedom, the time and the finances -- perversion is expensive -- to lead double lives without anyone detecting

them.

The bishops, therefore, had enormous difficulties in dealing effectively with errant priests because the cultural ideal was to get them treatment and get them back to work. When they attempted to discipline priests who were sexual abusers, their efforts were stymied by Roman bureaucrats, many of whom still do not admit the gravity or dimensions of the problem. America's bishops were frustrated by Roman officials who turned down their requests for authority to dismiss priests guilty of sex abuse. The HBO documentary "[Mea Maxima Culpa](#)" reveals similar frustration by Roman authorities of Irish bishops in their seeking swift action in dismissing priest sex abusers.

Hollywood moguls may continue to cover up their badly behaving assets, and many of its creative community, already in need of transfusions for their bleeding hearts, may think Christopher Dorner deserved more understanding and that Roman Polanski still deserves the freedom of the city for being a great artist despite his being a sexual abuser of a teenage girl.

Is it not hypocritical of them, and indeed of the new archbishop, not to give the same understanding they lavish on a murderer and a seducer of teenage girls to Mahony?

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