

1-17-2008 - BOOK Review, *Cardinal Mahony: A Novel*, by Robert Blair Kaiser

Reviewed by Susan V. Vogt, In the Vineyard

As a writer, I love books. As a type A personality, I rarely read novels. (I tend to want my reading to be productive and not just for pleasure so I mostly read for information and self-improvement.) As a VOTF member, I want to reform the church not just rail against it. As a National Representative Council (NRC) member I was given the book *Cardinal Mahony: A Novel*. It was long. I didn't expect to really like it, or even read it. From the title I guessed it would be just another diatribe against the hierarchy which, despite any truth in it, would lead more to anger than action.

I was wrong.

On the flight back from the VOTF convention in Providence, my official VOTF work being completed, I was caught with nothing to read. I thought I would give it a try. From the first page I was hooked and couldn't put *Cardinal Mahony* down.

Cardinal Mahony taught me some important lessons – not about clergy sexual abuse, episcopal cover-ups, or church politics. I was already well versed in those areas. What it taught me was the value of a story, the value of seeing the good in people, and calling them to live up to their best selves rather than complaining about their faults. Jesus was on to something when he talked in parables even though it often confused and irritated his disciples. He was on to something when he talked with the woman at the well about her future more than her past. It's a lesson for everyone – especially people who like to talk and write in straight lines like I do. Sometimes fiction can tell more truth and crooked lines can be more effective.

Cardinal Mahony is a “Romero story.” It's the story of how a person can change and that gives me hope for the church. Instead of railing against all that is bad about a hierarchy that covered up numerous cases of clergy sexual abuse, it tells the story of what would happen if one of those hierarchs changed and did everything for which people in VOTF have been calling. What if he joined us and we were all trying to renew the church together?

For the fact lovers among us, don't worry, Robert Blair Kaiser includes plenty of background information about what the experts say contributes to sexual abuse of children and plenty of documentation a la quotes from canon lawyer, Tom Doyle, OP. I skimmed through those sections, however, as I was already familiar with that information, as are most active VOTF members. For those not steeped in VOTF and the history of the sexual abuse crisis, however, it's an educational experience. It was the story that pulled me to keep reading, not the underlying education woven through the novel.

While reading *Cardinal Mahony*, I couldn't help wonder what the real Cardinal Mahony might think if he read it. I'd like to think that instead of getting defensive, it would spark his imagination of how an ideal church, a church led by courageous men and women with a talent for inspiring, not just making rules, would look. *Cardinal Mahony* puts Cardinal Mahony in a very good light. It calls him and us to be our best selves in a church worthy of her founder.

While not wanting to give away the plot, a key action of Cardinal Mahony is that he calls for a national church synod including both bishops and lay men and women. It sounds uncannily like the synod that VOTF leaders are currently exploring in partnership with other national church organizations. Sometimes fiction drives reality.

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