

July 22, 2007 - Mahony and the Catholic Church must institute some serious reforms

Editorial, By The Stockton Record (CA)

Actions speak louder than words.

A week ago today, Cardinal Roger Michael Mahony presided at Mass in the \$189.7 million Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles and then held a press conference.

He apologized to victims of alleged sex abuse by priests who are part of a \$660 million settlement to which Mahony and his diocese have agreed.

Here's what Mahony didn't say but should have:

I, too, have sinned. For too long, I withheld the truth. I worried more about legal issues than moral ones. I worked harder at protecting the church's image - and assets - than protecting vulnerable young people from Stockton to Los Angeles. I'm not qualified to lead. I resign.

Instead, the 71-year-old Mahony delivered his version of a mea culpa and homily.

The Catholic Church in America remains bruised but not broken.

In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops attempted to create a new internal structure that would protect children and punish pedophile priests. Mahony was there.

So was Bishop Stephen Blaire, who leads the Roman Catholic Diocese of Stockton. Blaire returned with a plan for change and a "zero-tolerance" policy for abusers.

The Stockton Diocese settled its abuse cases for \$9.5 million in 2004.

The tragic circumstances in Los Angeles are larger, more complex and all the more reason why transparency and accountability must become permanent cornerstones of church life.

Faced with a trial that was scheduled to begin the next day, Mahony directed the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and its lawyers to finally settle a priest sex-abuse scandal of unprecedented proportion.

It involved:

» 508 alleged victims over a 50-year period.

» Pedophile priests who were sent to treatment centers and transferred to new parishes. Repeatedly.

» Years of legal stonewalling by the nation's largest archdiocese, prolonging the anxiety and suffering of victims. Nine alleged victims have committed suicide since negotiations began in 2002, according to plaintiffs' attorney Raymond P. Boucher.

» The landmark \$660 million settlement (approximately \$1.3 million per victim), the largest such payout in U.S. church history. The funds will be cobbled together from insurance, other branches of the church and by selling some diocese property.

» Previous diocese settlements of \$60 million in similar cases, \$45 million of which wasn't covered by insurance.

Mahony hasn't been held accountable for his handling of the scandal.

That gap in justice resonates in the six-county Stockton Diocese, where Mahony was the bishop from 1980 to 1985.

"Deliver Us From Evil," a 2006 documentary film about pedophile priests, is centered around Oliver O'Grady, who was in the Stockton Diocese when Mahony was bishop.

O'Grady, later convicted of sexually abusing children, said in the film that Mahony knew he was a pedophile. Mahony has denied that claim.

Mahony's credibility among parishioners here and in Los Angeles has all but disappeared. For too long, he vehemently opposed dealing with the allegations.

Given the timing of the settlement, Mahony's critics question his sincerity even now - despite the public apology and personal meetings he's conducted with alleged victims.

Mahony could help his image if, as the settlement requires, he and the diocese provide internal files on the accused abusers.

As a condition of the agreement, they are required to give the files to a retired Los Angeles judge, who will determine what can be made public. There should be no resistance from Mahony or other church officials.

Many faithful Catholics must be deeply disappointed that much of the \$660 million will be diverted from ministries, outreach to the poor, feeding the hungry and other church programs. Forty percent of the settlement - \$264 million - will be paid out in attorneys' fees

All because of members of the priesthood who were protected and tolerated by a failure of leadership.

Their spiritual leadership having failed them, millions of Catholics nationwide and thousands of faithful, diligent priests have been humiliated and embarrassed.

Along with their millions of trusting parishioners, they've heard the words but still wait for the appropriate action to match them.

Making some real changes

Three years ago, officials in virtually all of the nation's 195 Roman Catholic dioceses, including Stockton's, created policies and programs to protect children from sex abuse. Among the changes in the Stockton Diocese:

- A written policy for dealing with sexual-abuse accusations.
- A code of pastoral conduct for all priests, deacons, seminarians, lay employees and volunteers. The code forbids specific behaviors, stating that ministers must not "engage in, nor tolerate, physical, psychological, emotional, written, sexual or verbal harassment of anyone."
- A training coordinator to help with child-abuse matters.
- Updated techniques for screening and evaluating candidates for ordination.
- A review board that advises Bishop Stephen Blaire in his evaluation of sexual-abuse cases. It comprises social workers, law enforcement professionals, attorneys and others working in the behavioral sciences.
- Creation of a victims assistance advocate.

How well the protocols of this oversight work will be unknown until they are tested. The Stockton Diocese has been audited every year since their creation in early 2004.