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Cover story

Church in Crisis -- A chronology of sex abuse in Southern California

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Analysis

This chronology concerns what the Southern California public knows about regional clerical sex abuse in the Catholic church and when the public knew it. It is seen through excerpts from the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, the local legal newspaper.

The chronology runs from March 2002 to January 2003. It opens with two *Times* articles, one on the Catholic priests and pastors damaged by the behavior of their confreres; the other on predatory priests' victims.

In its most extensive single-issue coverage, on Aug. 18, the *Times* devoted five pages of the paper to an account and listing of all accusations, charges and verdicts in cases and allegations concerning priests in Los Angeles since Roger Mahony was appointed archbishop in 1985. (The *Times* account was summarized in *NCR's* Aug. 30, 2002, issue.)

The opening sentences in bold are the headlines as published in the newspapers; the date, which follows the text, is the publication date of the issue.

March 2002

L.A. Priests anguished, angry over sex scandal

At a workshop on abuse, some Catholic priests say they "feel they're being picked on." Several priests lamented that the furor has caused them to shrink back from the normal gestures of hugging children. ... One

found himself hesitating over whether to place his hands on a parishioner's head during absolution rituals. -- March 16

Pontiff speaks on sex abuse

'Grievous' acts by priests are decried; critics say remarks fall short
Mahony confirms some local clerics have been removed. "Cardinal Roger Mahony for the first time confirmed that a 'few local priests' in the three-county Los Angeles archdiocese have been removed from ministries following accusations of sexually abusing minors. Mahony did not divulge how many clerics had been fired." -- March 22

Priest fired as head of school

Encino dismissal follows allegations that he molested two students and other youths in the 1970s. "Rev. Dominic Savino was ousted from the presidency of Crespi Carmelite High School and from acting as a priest by the Order of Carmelites, which operates the school, after it learned of allegations of sexual abuse." -- March 23

Sexual abuse victims confront cardinal

Protesters in Camarillo quietly reproach Mahony for not doing enough about the problem of molestation by priests. A man whose son was sexually abused by two priests in Santa Barbara told reporters Mahony needs to release the names of all perpetrators "so they cannot move on and abuse elsewhere." Carrying a sign that read, "Break the Silence," Jim Falls said he hoped his presence might "save a child" from what he endured. Falls, now 34, said he was molested when he was 15. The archdiocese recently dismissed six to 12 priests for sexually abusing minors, according to church sources, but it has refused to provide any details about their identity, location or number. -- March 25

Mahony won't name abusers

At a "Mass of Reparations," Mahony told a gathering of 300 priests ... that he would support victims of long-ago sexual abuse who want to break confidentiality agreements and talk, but would not release the names of their abusers. Mahony also said he accepted full responsibility as head of the nation's largest archdiocese for the sins of the past. "I offer my sincere apologies," he said. -- March 26

LAPD already has the facts on dismissed priests, Mahony says

"Mahony wrote [L.A. Police Chief Bernard Parks that the priests] 'were prosecuted and served probation many years ago. These cases are a matter of public record and known to your detectives.'" -- March 29

APRIL

Mahony e-mails cite fear over scandals

"A series of confidential e-mails written by Cardinal Roger M. Mahony show how pervasively the nationwide child-abuse scandal in the Catholic

church has affected the Los Angeles archdiocese. The e-mails, leaked to radio station KFI, which provided copies to the *Times*, paint a picture of a sometimes agitated archbishop alarmed that he is losing public relations ground. The memos, written during the past three weeks, capture an archdiocese confronting political, legal and moral challenges: where to place a priest newly accused to molesting children; whether the church should start victims support groups; how to anticipate and counteract media accusations; how to give 'instruction' in child-abuse law to the Los Angeles police chief, and how to measure the number of weeks or months before a 'healing' process begins in the church.

"In one e-mail, a top Mahony adviser recommends that the cardinal remain deliberately vague about where the eight priests served before Mahony fired them." -- April 6

Our Big Mistake

Text of an e-mail from Mahony to archdiocesan lawyer Sr. Judith Murphy: "Sr. Judy -- as the drum beats continue from every side for us to release the 'names,' I must still point to what I consider our greatest political mistake of the past few weeks. If I recall, of the 8 priests involved, 5 had already been reported to local law enforcement agencies. That leaves 3.

"Recall that I also pressed for you to meet with [LAPD sex crimes Detective] Barraclough and 'consult' with him about the other 3 so that we could state without hesitation that all priests no longer in service had been reported to various law enforcement agencies.

"You resisted quite strongly that suggestion.

"I hope you have now changed your mind by now!" -- April 6

The Amazing 'Teflon Cardinal'

"In 1998, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony was a central figure in one of the most notorious sex-abuse trials in Catholic church history. The case involved two Stockton-area brothers who had been abused by a priest from the time they were toddlers until they were in their late teens, both before and after the Stockton diocese had received complaints against the priest. A jury was so disturbed by the drama that unfolded in San Joaquin County Superior Court, it awarded \$30 million in damages to the brothers, an amount later negotiated to \$7 million. Mahony was not a defendant in the case, but he was bishop of Stockton during a critical period addressed in the lawsuit. He had ordered an evaluation after the priest himself admitted he was a molester, then reassigned him to another parish, where he abused victims for years to come." -- April 7

Mahony gives abuse panel more muscle

Mahony announced that he is expanding the scope and authority of a

panel overseeing all sexual abuse allegations in the Los Angeles archdiocese in an effort to add more credibility to the process. ... He will expand the existing nine-member sexual abuse advisory council to 15 members. -- April 18

Mahony takes his message to airwaves

Cardinal, slow to react publicly to sex-abuse crisis, regains his media-savvy ways. "On a day when an alternative newspaper pictured him on its cover with a zipper locking his lips, Mahony settled in for a series of interviews to get word out he is committed to taking direct action against sexual abuse." -- April 19

In the crucible, Mahony takes control of message

After a defensive start, the Los Angeles archdiocese's media-savvy cardinal is getting high marks for confronting abuse and presenting himself as a reformer.

"... Mahony can brag that his archdiocese has implemented the toughest rules in the nation against priests who molest children. But that boast was made possible only because one of the church's stubborn accusers insisted last December that the new policy be part of his record \$5.2 million settlement. In all, 11 changes were made to the diocese policies as part of a settlement with abuse victim Ryan DiMaria." -- April 28

(The archdiocesan spokesperson said that zero tolerance was not mandated by the DiMaria case settlement and that all but two of the non-monetary agreements were already in place or being planned by the archdiocese prior to the DiMaria settlement.)

... Two weeks ago

[Mahony] went to a major public relations firm, Weber Shandwick, to craft the message that would serve him in the weeks ahead. He began to speak publicly. ... He began every interview and discussion with comments about the victims and apologies to them. -- April 28

Priest accused of molesting 4 retires early

"A 69-year-old Catholic cleric assigned to the new cathedral in downtown Los Angeles has been reported to police and forced to retire by ... Mahony because of allegations that he sexually abused four boys in the 1960s and 1970s. The [alleged victim], now 46, said he told church officials in 1989 that he and one of his brothers were molested by [Fr. Carl] Sutphin in the 1960s when the priest worked at Maywood's St. Rose of Lima church. Two years later, he said, he wrote a letter to Cardinal Mahony making the same allegations. 'They promised me he'd retire and not be allowed to wear a collar,' said the man." -- April 29

O.C. [Orange County] parish loses 2nd priest to abuse report

In Dana Point, a clergyman is on leave after past molestation is alleged.

San Bernardino diocese ousts two clerics after similar accusations. --
April 30

Cardinal sued over molestation cases

Civil filings on behalf of two sets of brothers accuse Mahony of running a criminal enterprise. "... Mahony was sued ... in Los Angeles Superior Court under a federal racketeering law [RICO] typically used to dismantle organized crime operations. ... The lawsuits allege that Mahony protected abusive priests as head of the archdiocese, a pattern of behavior that constitutes a criminal enterprise." -- April 30

MAY

Church sued for abuser's transfer

[Milwaukee] bishops sent to Orange County a priest convicted of molestation, suit alleges. Man says he became a victim. -- May 1

Priest is sought in paternity claim

Woman says one of seven clerics impregnated her and asks for cardinal's help. "A woman who alleges that she was made pregnant at the age of 16 by one of seven Catholic priests who had sex with her 20 years ago said she wants ... Mahony to help her daughter identify which man is her father. Rita Milla said she was sexually abused by Fr. Santiago Tamayo [who in 1991 apologized face-to-face to Milla]. [The cardinal was] very open to helping Milla identify the father." -- May 7

Cardinal Mahony kept cleric's abuse secret for 4 years

"A popular Los Angeles priest told ... Mahony in 1986 that he molested young boys but was reassigned to parishes and allegedly continued his sexual abuse of minors for more than a decade, documents and interviews show. Mahony later approved a secret \$1.3 million payment to two men who said they had been abused by the priest, Fr. Michael Stephen Baker, from 1984 to 1999. The cardinal arranged for the priest to quietly retire from the archdiocese in 2000." -- May 16

(The archdiocesan media spokesperson said that Baker was sent for treatment, severely restricted in ministry when he returned, and under a specific agreement with Mahony to have neither physical nor unsupervised contact with minors. Baker violated all the terms of the agreements, the spokesperson said, adding that when Mahony learned of the allegations against Baker in 2000, he immediately terminated Baker's assignment and began laicization proceedings against him. The archdiocese also sent a fax to all parishes notifying them of Baker's status; when he was laicized on Dec. 5, 2000, all priests of the diocese as well as neighboring dioceses were informed that Baker was no longer a priest.)

D.A. demands Mahony turn over documents on abuse

The leader of the Los Angeles archdiocese is told to comply or face grand jury action. “[Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve] Cooley told Mahony it was no longer acceptable to provide only verbal information to law enforcement agencies, as he said the Los Angeles archdiocese has done until now. Cooley’s warning was the toughest yet from law enforcement after nearly three months of guarded responses by the archdiocese.” -- May 17

L.A. archdiocese enlists services of top PR firm

Sitrick & Co., “known for navigating clients through bad publicity,” has been hired by the archdiocese to navigate the sex abuse scandal. Sitrick has represented Enron after the energy giant’s fall, talk show host Laura Schlessinger after her negative comments about gays, actress Halle Berry after her traffic accident, comedian Paula Poundstone after her child-endangerment case and Orange County during its 1995 bankruptcy. -- May 18

Mahony vows to open files to authorities

Under threat of grand jury probe, he says documents will be available. Meanwhile, Vatican discourages disclosure of abuse allegations. “One day after being threatened with a grand jury investigation ... Mahony pledged to make the Roman Catholic archdiocese’s files on priestly abuse available to the district attorney’s office.” -- May 18

Priest’s abuse case dates to ’67

The archdiocese did not remove Fr. G. Neville Rucker until April. “The Los Angeles archdiocese knew for three decades about 1967 child abuse accusations against ... Rucker. ... Rucker is the last of seven archdiocese priests forced out of the ministry this year as Mahony began enforcing a zero-tolerance policy ... included in a \$5.2 million lawsuit settlement last year.” -- May 18

Ex-altar boy alleges priest abused him

Complaint filed under federal racketeering law claims Mahony protected Fr. Michael Stephen Baker. Cardinal calls suit baseless. “The lawsuit alleges that Baker abused at least a dozen young boys between 1975 and 1999. ... Mahony called the racketeering [RICO] suit ‘baseless and irresponsible.’ Baker acknowledged telling Mahony in a 1986 meeting that he had abused ‘two or three’ children. Baker said the cardinal did not press him for details and he did not provide any. The *Times* reported last week that Mahony transferred Baker to nine parishes after learning about the priest’s history of sex abuse and later approved a secret \$1.3 million settlement to two men.” -- May 21

Experts doubt RICO will fit clergy scandal

Critics say publicity is only motive for conspiracy charges -- not a “predicate” act. “The only valid reason for using RICO [the Racketeering Influence and Corrupt Organizations law] against the Vatican or any entity

of the Catholic church, in the context of child sexual abuse, is to gain publicity or access to more clients,” said Notre Dame University law professor G. Robert Blakey, the nation’s foremost expert on racketeering law. -- *Daily Journal*, May 22

JUNE

Ethnicity colors views of scandal

Some Catholics in the L.A. archdiocese earmarked their weekly offering “parish only,” withholding money from the archdiocese in an attempt to voice displeasure with the handling of the sex abuse crisis. Others, including hundreds of Latinos, took part in a massive street rally, singing hymns and waving signs proclaiming their support for their faith, their priests, abuse victims and Cardinal Mahony. -- June 10

Files on 8 priests are demanded

The archdiocese says it will comply with third set of subpoenas in sexual abuse inquiry. -- June 15

Mahony asks forgiveness for handling of scandal

“Acknowledging his own shortcomings in handling sexual abuse by the clergy ... Mahony on Sunday asked ‘for forgiveness’ from Southern California Catholics ‘for not understanding earlier the extent of the problem’ or acting sooner to remove priests who abused minors. ... two-page letter was read to congregations at the 287 churches throughout the three-county archdiocese.” -- June 24

JULY

Church’s defense called valid -- to a point

Mahony, meeting with a group of *Times* reporters and editors ... repeatedly said it was unfair to impose today’s standards of judgment on bishops who had kept priests in ministry on the basis of psychological advice of a different era. -- July 4

Lawsuit accuses bishop of sex abuse

A bishop who was forced to resign as head of the Santa Rosa diocese by a sex scandal in 1999 was accused in a suit of molesting a Huntington Park altar boy. The abuse allegedly began in 1968 and continued for nearly 20 years. The suit against G. Patrick Ziemann, 60, claims the relationship went on until Ziemann was named auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles in 1987. -- July 7

SEPTEMBER

Archdiocese to cut programs, jobs to close budget gap

“[Mahony] said the deficits result from losses in the stock market. Other officials of the archdiocese have said in the past that the church also needs

to set aside money to prepare for the potential costs of sexual abuse cases.” -- Sept. 19

Two former L.A.-area priests are arrested

Pair allegedly molested children years ago; a warrant is issued for third cleric. -- Sept. 26

Two ex-priests charged in molestations

Michael Baker does not enter a plea to 29 counts; Carlos Rodriguez pleads guilty to eight. A third cleric is still at large. -- Sept. 27

OCTOBER

Ex-priest pleads not guilty to sex abuse

Former priest Michael Baker faces 29 counts. In another case, bail is reduced for retired priest accused of molesting seven girls. -- Oct. 18

Priest is sought on 33 counts of molestation

Warrant is issued for Sigfried Frank Widera, who served in Anaheim and Yorba Linda; he previously had been convicted in Wisconsin. -- Oct. 29

DECEMBER

L.A. priest blamed for legacy of pain

Ten persons, including relatives, say the Jesuit molested them. He denies it and has not been charged. “Jesuit leaders say they first learned about [Fr. Jerold] Lindner’s past a decade ago when his brother told them that the priest had sexually abused three nieces, a nephew and a younger sibling.” -- Dec. 14

JANUARY 2003

Lawyers want archdiocese’s internal papers

Lawyers for 140 alleged victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests said they will not negotiate blank settlements with the Los Angeles archdiocese and the Orange diocese without first gaining access to financial information and internal documents that could force accountability for higher-ups in the church.

“J. Michael Hennigan, of Hennigan, Bennett & Droman, attorney and spokesman for the Los Angeles archdiocese, said, ‘All our energies are focused on resolution of these claims.’” -- *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, Jan. 3

National Catholic Reporter, January 31, 2003

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