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

Cardinal Mahony and the 'kill the messenger' syndrome

Robert McClory | Apr. 30, 2013 NCR Today

In his extensive report [1] on Cardinal Roger Mahony's reaction to the John Jay College's proposed 2003 study of child abuse by priests in the United States, Tom Roberts cited newly released letters showing the cardinal's vigorous efforts to disparage the John Jay College and scuttle the study. The John Jay research forms, he wrote, were "designed by people who apparently have no understanding of the Roman Catholic Church, ecclesiastical culture, hierarchical structure, or the language of the Roman Catholic Church." If the conference of bishops cannot cancel its contract with John Jay, Mahony wrote, it should pay the fee "and abandon further contact with them."

It happens that this was not Mahony's first attempt to do away with a messenger of bad news. In similar fashion in 1990, he protested the findings of an exhaustive study of the priest shortage also funded by the bishops conference. That study, headed by the late sociologist Richard Schoenherr, concluded that Los Angeles had the worst record of priest recruitment among all the dioceses studied, despite already having one of the highest priest-to-parishioner ratios among Hispanics in the country.

In a widely publicized statement, Mahony denied the archdiocese has a priest shortage and blasted the study: "I reject its pessimistic assessment and feel that the Catholic Church in our country has been done a great disservice ... by the report. The study presumes that the only factors at work are sociology and statistical research. This is nonsense. We are disciples of Jesus Christ, we live by God's grace, and our future is shaped by God's design for the church -- not by sociologists."

Schoenherr called Mahony's reaction "short-sighted" and a prime example of "organizational myopia." As it has turned out, the predictions of priest shortage in 1990s and 2000s by Schoenherr proved to be quite accurate for all the dioceses studied, including Los Angeles.

Regarding Mahony's dissatisfaction with the John Jay study, Robert Bennett, a National Review Board member, called Mahony's criticism "outrageous," "unjustified" and "absolutely irresponsible." And Bishop Wilton Gregory, head of the bishops conference at the time, sent Mahony a point-by-point rebuttal of his claims. The John Jay study was accepted by the bishops and completed in 2004, and it has been the foundation for ongoing studies of abuse and remedies of the problem.

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