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Los Angeles archdiocesan officials are finally stepping out of their bubbles

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

LA abuse cases

A few years ago, an official of the Los Angeles archdiocese pulls me over for a private conversation. This attack on the church for "child sex abuse" is inaccurate, he asserts. The vast majority of victims are in their late teens; they are "youths," he notes, not really "children." I am stunned for a moment, then advise him this is not an argument he might ever want to make to the general public. The official nods slowly.

At a dinner around the same time, a high-ranking cleric in the archdiocese complains to me and another person sitting next to us. Several states, including California, were then pushing through bills to extend the statute of limitations on child sex abuse as the sandal was gathering steam. This, the official charges, is unfair -- this, he says, is changing the legal rules mid-stream. The church, he argues in all seriousness, just wants to play by the rules.

And so it went here out west, year after year, until the bubble burst, as we knew it eventually would, over the last few days. Los Angeles' new archbishop, Jose Gomez, made public church files that details the depths of abuse and the lengths the cover-up went to in order to protect the church in the eyes of the law and the people.

The stories of abuse are harrowing, but the cover-up is worse. News accounts detail how parents and brothers and police investigators all reached out to Cardinal Roger Mahony and other church officials, firm in belief they would do the right thing in the face of such depravity. But as we have known for too long a time now, they did not.

The bubble allowed it to go on for so long. I don't think the officials I wrote about at the top here, those

people who approached me, knew of the cover-up -- at least not fully. But they bought into the bubble and helped keep it going: Inside archdiocesan offices, the church was the real victim, a casualty of a biased media and anti-Catholic lawmakers out to make a name for themselves. At the high-end fundraisers and award galas celebrating social justice and good works, the archdiocese was an unswerving force for positive change in a polyglot city, its motives unquestioned beyond a vague sense that, sure, some bad things happened, but these were far overwhelmed by the good. No reason to accentuate the negative.

It was this bubble that allowed Cardinal Mahony to say, with apparent sincerity, that he didn't understand the pain abuse victims went through until he actually met with them in 2006, 2007 and 2008. This, even as he knew full well of files just now made public, and the dark details they contain about physical injury and mental anguish visited on victims by trusted clerics.

To be sure, we all have bubbles in our lives, individual and group realities that allow us to push on with our day and sleep at night as best we can. But then there is Mahony himself: His individual bubble allowed him to focus on the good he had done, and it was very much there -- his fights for immigrant rights and social justice. In his bubble, those overcame the missteps he may have made in other areas.

His bubble, it seems, lives on -- after Archbishop Gomez took the unprecedented step of removing Mahony from his duties, the cardinal actually fought back. He released a public letter to Gomez that reads in part: "Unfortunately, I cannot return now to the 1980s and reverse actions and decisions made then. But when I retired as an active archbishop, I handed over to you an archdiocese that was second to none in protecting children and youths."

The cardinal is right -- none of us can step back in time. But each of us, at some point in our lives, is challenged to step out of our bubble and face things as they are. The moment for Mahony is way past due.

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