

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 13, 2013 at 1:06pm

Three cardinals who could cast a shadow over the transition

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NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Rome — Earlier this week, confirmation that Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles will participate in next month's conclave was greeted with trepidation by some, worrying that it may cast a shadow over the papal transition by stirring fresh debate over the church's response to the sexual abuse crisis.

Two weeks ago, Mahony's successor, Archbishop Jose Gomez, relieved him of "administrative and public duties" over what Gomez described as a "failure to fully protect young people entrusted to his care." The move came in tandem with the release of archdiocesan files on abuse cases, many of which were handled by Mahony.

In that context, Mahony's presence in Rome may raise eyebrows and stir commentary.

Today, Rome caught glimpses of a prelate who's already been down that path, in the form of Cardinal Bernard Law.

Although now 81 and ineligible to vote in the conclave, Law was present both at Benedict XVI's general audience in the Paul VI hall this morning and at the Ash Wednesday Mass this evening in St. Peter's Basilica. He resigned as archbishop of Boston in December 2002 amid strong criticism of his handling of abuse cases and relocated to Rome as the Archpriest of the Basilica of St. Mary Major. He stepped down from that post in November 2011.

Back in April 2005, Law's visibility during events surrounding the death of John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI stirred protests from victims' groups and reformers.

"It's entirely inappropriate," Michael Kuczynski, a spokesperson for the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, said at the time.

Kuczynski said Law's public presence proved that "the church has a long, long way to walk on the path of healing."

At least one other cardinal linked to the abuse scandals is destined to be even more prominent over the next month: Angelo Sodano, former Secretary of State under John Paul II and currently the dean of the College of Cardinals. It was Sodano who delivered a brief tribute to Benedict XVI when he made his surprise announcement Monday, and he helped the pope celebrate the Ash Wednesday liturgy tonight.

In his role as dean, Sodano will preside over functions after Benedict steps down and before the new pope is chosen, including the much-watched "Mass for the election of the Roman Pontiff" that marks the last public event before the conclave.

Critics charge Sodano has a troubling record on the abuse crisis for at least three reasons.

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First, he's known as a stalwart defender in the Vatican of the late Mexican Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ. The Legionaries later acknowledged that Maciel was guilty of misconduct, including sexual abuse of former members. As late as 2005, while the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was reaching the conclusion that Maciel was guilty, the Secretariat of State under Sodano issued a public statement denying there was any case against him.

Second, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna charged in May 2010 that it was Sodano who blocked an investigation against Schönborn's predecessor, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër, when Groër faced charges of sexual abuse in the 1990s. Although Schönborn later apologized for reprimanding a fellow cardinal, he never retracted the substance of the charge.

Third, it was Sodano who sparked international outrage last year by using a platform during Pope Benedict's Easter Mass to compare criticism of the church on the sexual abuse crisis to "petty gossip."

Given the possibility that images of these three prelates may stir controversy, some have suggested they should voluntarily withdraw, or at least do what they can to keep a low profile. Defenders, however, point out that cardinals are expected to take part in events during a papal transition unless serious matters of health prevent them from doing so.

Defenders of Benedict's record on the abuse crisis are already scrambling to stamp out a fresh round of criticism elicited by his resignation. Today, attorney Jeffrey Lena, who represents the Vatican in American lawsuits, issued a statement responding to suggestions that as a private citizen, Benedict may be more exposed to prosecution by the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

"The notion that the International Criminal Court would ever pursue a case against Pope Benedict XVI, who is widely regarded as one of the great human rights leaders of our time, is both nonsensical and offensive," Lena said.

"Contrary to the uninformed musings of a reckless few, the Holy Father's decision to renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome will have no effective impact on his legal position regarding this question under international law," he said, adding that "under the leadership of this Pope, more has been done by the Catholic Church to address the sexual abuse issue than by any other organization."

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