

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

March 5, 2013 at 6:19am

Mahony & Mercy

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Distinctly Catholic

Ever since 2004, when then-Archbishop Raymond Burke warned that he would deny communion to Sen. John Kerry because of the senator's pro-choice stance, many of us have argued that Burke's interpretation of Canon 915 was mistaken, that it is not the place of the minister of communion to decide whether or not a person should receive communion, but that it is up to the communicant to make the decision whether or not to present herself for communion. Most American bishops, and the Bishop of Rome, have never followed Burke's advice. One Latin American cardinal said denying communion to someone for such a reason would be a scandal. Burke's position is the minority position and it deserves to be such.

So, it is more than a little curious to see many of the same people who argued against Burke now insisting that Cardinal Roger Mahony absent himself from the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI. The release of thousands of pages of documents in sex abuse cases in Los Angeles demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that Cardinal Mahony took great pains to shield pedophile priests from the law. That such shielding was a sin, there is little doubt. But, if the conclave was only to admit non-sinners, the Sistine Chapel would be very empty.

I was especially alarmed by a press release from the increasingly obnoxious group Catholics United. I had thought that this group was concerned about promoting the Church's teachings about social justice in the public square. Now, they seem intent on promoting internal Church reform. They have a petition drive to encourage Cardinal Mahony to absent himself from the conclave, which is a rather juvenile way to promote change within the Church. I suspect, of course, that their ambition is to get more hits on their website and more contributions in the coffers. We all have to make a living I suppose but the specter of

this group applying Scarlet Letters all around the College of Cardinals has nothing to do with promoting social justice, nor for that matter, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Cardinal Mahony has not done himself any favors by making a series of statements that make one wonder if he is sorry for what he did or sorry that he got caught. His comments often sound self-pitying, as he was the victim of the sex abuse. "People say, 'well, why didn't you call the police?'" In those days no one reported these things to the police, usually at the request of families," Mahony recently said. "What I did in those years was consistent with what everybody did, in the Boy Scouts, in public schools, private schools, across the country." This proves a salient point made by Melinda Henneberger: The cover-up of clerical sex abuse was not really a conspiracy in the normal sense of the word, and that is the frightening part. No one had to make an actual conspiracy. The culture itself invited them to act as they did and they did not recognize the wrongness of it. That is what is truly scary.

To be clear: I believe that any bishop who has covered up sex abuse, shifted pedophile clergy around so they can commit more crimes, or in any way facilitated the crime of child rape, such a bishop should retire from public ministry or be removed from such ministry by the Holy See. It is a scandal that Bishop Robert Finn is still the Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph and if the new pope wishes to send a clear message that he will not tolerate episcopal cover-ups but instead hold bishops accountable, he could well start by demanding Finn's resignation. If I were in Mahony's shoes, I would have followed the example of Cardinal Keith O'Brien, and stayed home. But, I am not in Mahony's shoes and his conscience may differ from mine.

The analogy with Cardinal O'Brien is not an exact one. As far as we know, Cardinal O'Brien broke his vows with men who were not minors. It appears that he was, in some sense, their superior when the naughtiness occurred, but this was not pedophilia. And, to my way of thinking, a priest or bishop or cardinal who breaks his vow of celibacy commits a sin, but not a crime. A bishop who covers up sex abuse commits both a sin and a crime. I do not wish to throw stones at either Cardinal Mahony or Cardinal O'Brien, even though the media seems to have an endless stockpile of stones for throwing.

My worry in all this is that we as a Church run the risk of demanding purity from our prelates in ways that distort the Christian tradition and the Gospel itself. Our God came to earth to proclaim God's mercy. None of us would like to be judged based on our worst decision. Wrong-doing does not denude a person's humanity, indeed, it is only when we are honest about our sinfulness that the Word of God really comes alive and we can feel in our hearts and minds the power of the words of absolution: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." If there are more powerful words in the English language, I do not know them, but they are only powerful when we are honest about our sins.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is from the First Letter of John, Chapter 1, verses 9 & 10: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." I do not know Cardinal Mahony or Cardinal O'Brien. I do not know if they deceived themselves or not. I do know that they are sinners which is to say that I know that they are men. So will the other cardinals who gather in conclave be sinners, and I suspect some of the sins the others committed are worse than whatever passed between Cardinal O'Brien and a few other priests years back. Most of all, I know that a Church that demands purity of its ministers is not a Catholic Church. It is a small-minded, puritanical church and not one I would want to join. My sins are too many to start hurling stones at others' sins. No one has a right to public ministry and there are types of

malfeasance that should require a minister to step down. But, everyone has the need, the desperate need, for God's mercy. Let us never forget that and let us have a Pope who reflects that mercy in his words and deeds.

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