

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony
Archdiocese of Los Angeles

(A chapter from the book, *Catholic Priests Falsely Accused* by David F. Pierre, Jr. (2011))

“May you rot in hell you pile of crap!”

“Let’s tar and feather this ped-pleaser and run him out of town.”

“I hope that this protector of child predators ROTS IN HELL like he so rightly deserves. Its (sic) anybody’s guess how many children he may have also sexually preyed upon.”¹

Those are readers of the *Los Angeles Times* posting comments about Cardinal Roger M. Mahony upon his exit as archbishop of Los Angeles in February 2011.

What many of those readers may not have known is that Cardinal Mahony was not just the subject of one false abuse accusation, but two of them.

In the first accusation, a 51-year-old mentally ill woman came forward in April 2002 to accuse the cardinal of abusing her. She relayed a vague and bizarre episode which she said had happened decades earlier when she was a student at San Joaquin Memorial High School in Fresno, California.

“I know it doesn’t make sense,” the woman said. “I can’t even tell you when it happened. But I passed out one day near the band room, and when I woke up my pants were off and then I saw Mahony’s face. And then I passed out again.”²

Then the woman told the *Fresno Bee* that she did not even know if she was even molested or touched by then-Monsignor Mahony.

“I was unconscious. I don’t know if [Cardinal Mahony] molested me, but he could have,” the woman said.³

Uh-huh.

As journalists further questioned the woman about her claim, it became increasingly clear that the woman was quite unstable. She openly admitted that she was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the early 1970’s. She also acknowledged that she came forward with her claim in large part because the state was about to cut her disability payments and she desperately needed some cash.

In addition, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “[The accuser] also said that nearly everyone she has encountered in her life – from her parents and other family members to her high school classmates to her former co-workers – have either molested, abused or emotionally mistreated her.”⁴

The police thoroughly investigated the woman’s claim and cleared the cardinal.

Then, a few months later, a “con artist with a criminal history of fraud, theft and impersonating a police officer” came forward to claim that the cardinal had molested him in 1982 when then-Bishop Mahony served in Stockton.⁵

This second accusation was so egregiously false that law officials actually decided to criminally charge the man with an attempt to extort the Catholic Church.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted a California county prosecutor. “I’m very pleased that we were able to apprehend this suspect,” said District Attorney John D. Phillips. “There are legitimate victims of this type of crime, and this makes it more difficult and burdensome for people that may have a legitimate case.”⁶

One cannot help but wonder if the cardinal’s high public profile facilitated and expedited the confirmation of his innocence. As soon as the media scrutinized the nature of the allegations, it was obvious to any clear-thinking person that the accusations were demonstrably false.

In this case, it appears that the high-public profile of Cardinal Mahony worked to his advantage in facilitating the establishment of his innocence. Journalists were more eager to take the time and explore the veracity of the claims against him. Under close examination, one could clearly see that the accusations against him were false.

But what about the typical parish priest with almost no public media profile at all? The media rarely scrutinizes accusations against regular parish priests in the same critical manner with which those against Cardinal Mahony were. (Recall also the high-profile 1993 accusation against Chicago’s Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. The “victim” gave a lengthy and tearful account of his “abuse” on CNN and received huge media coverage. The media ran wild with the story until the accuser essentially recanted his claim and admitted that his memory was “not reliable.” He also dropped a \$10 million lawsuit.)

One cannot help but think that if the media scrutinized the abuse claims against regular parish priests at the same level as a cardinal, more fraudulent accusations would be exposed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ The Times has archived the article, and the comments are no longer viewable, but the piece is, Mitchell Landsberg, “Roger Mahony leaves a mixed legacy,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2011.

² Mark Arax and Larry Stammer, “Mahony’s accuser describes history of mental problems,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2002.

³ David R. Price, Ph.D., and James J. McDonald, Jr., “The Problem of False Claims of Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *Risk Management*, January 2003.

⁴ Arax and Stammer, April 2002.

⁵ Andrew Blankstein, “Mahoney accuser held in Stockton,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 2002.

⁶ Ibid.