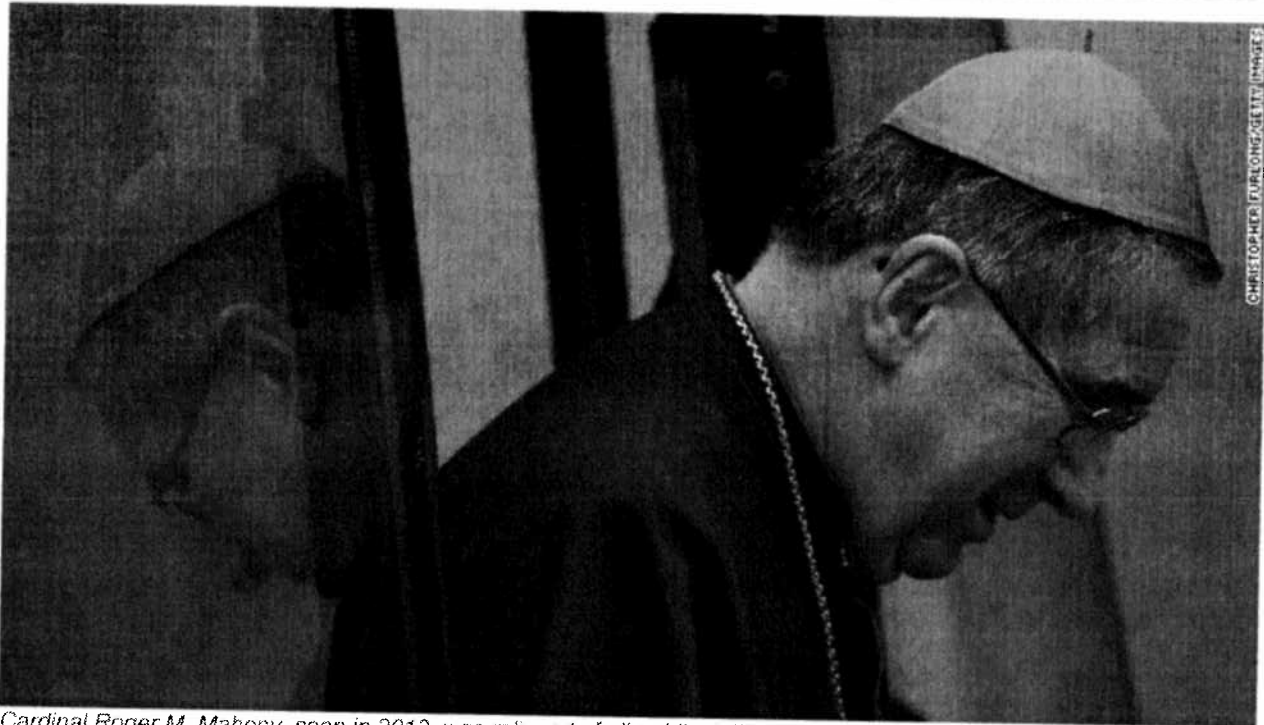


## Pope Francis must finally root out child abuse

By Mary Dispenza

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Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, seen in 2013, was relieved of all public duties over his mishandling of cases of sex abuse of children.

**Editor's note:** Mary Dispenza, a former nun, was a plaintiff in a successful class action suit against the Los Angeles Archdiocese over child molestation claims. She is the area representative for SNAP, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, in Bellevue, Washington. She is also the author of "Split: A Child, a Priest and the Catholic Church."

**(CNN)** -- Finally. Finally. Finally, a strong important voice in the world, the United Nations, speaks out on behalf of the rights of children and condemns the Vatican and the bishops for crimes of violence, rape and sexual abuse against children by transferring pedophile priests from parish to parish, withholding documents for prosecution and perpetuating an institutional culture of secrecy and shame.

What's truly shameful is that the Catholic Church was not itself that strong and important voice, protecting "the least of these." It's shameful that in spite of Pope Francis' refreshing compassion toward the poor and downtrodden, to date he has not addressed the issue fully. Pope Francis is caught up in the shame and like most of his brother bishops, seems unwilling to say, "Enough is enough -- not ever again in our church will one of these little children be harmed."

The media have said the church is suffering from a "code of secrecy." Kirsten Sandberg, the chairwoman of the United Nations, put it this way: "We think it is a horrible thing that is being kept silent both by the Holy See itself and in local parishes. "

As a survivor of rape and violence at the hands of a priest when I was a young girl, I

understand that secrecy.

I went silent at age 7 and became a part of the secret code that no one could unlock in me, because there were always pieces missing. For the rest of my childhood I really wasn't there. I split and left a part of me behind in shame and secrecy.

It has taken me more than half a lifetime to piece myself back together. I was 52 years old and still captivated by the Catholic Church when I let the buried "secret" memories emerge. His name was Father Rucker -- George Neville Rucker. I must have trusted him when he asked me to crawl up on his lap as he sat watching a movie in an auditorium so long ago. He raped me while my mother was in the lunchroom nearby.

The tragedy here -- among others -- is that Mom died before I was strong enough to tell her about that terrible day. We missed out on conversations about intimacy and love because I would always shut down and disconnect. Rape robbed me and my family of so much that mattered -- like truth and honesty between us.

After high school at age 18, I entered the convent of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Santa Barbara, California, and remained there as a nun for 15 years. Detaching from the destructive invasion of Father Rucker into my body and soul allowed me to hold onto God and to the sisters I loved. Very simply, that is how I was able over half a lifetime to remain in the Catholic Church until the day I awakened to the tragedy of the little girl whom I once was.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles released 12,000 pages of files on scores of priests accused of sexually abusing children in 2013. I found out that the pastor of our parish back in 1947 suspected Father Rucker of "touching" little girls. It was the bishop who would not listen and passed Father Rucker on and on until 2002, when he was defrocked. He had become a real liability to Cardinal Roger Mahony, head of the archdiocese.

About 33 women accused him of abusing them when they were young. That's five decades of abuse.

In 2002, he was charged with 29 counts of molesting girls. He was taken off a cruise ship on its way to Russia to face the charges; authorities thought he was trying to flee. But his case was dismissed in 2003 after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that the charges were too old.

It is easy to think that when we talk about the crisis of child rape and abuse that we are talking about the past -- and the Catholic Church would have us believe that this most tragic era in church history is over. It is not. It lives on today. Pedophiles are still in the priesthood. Coverups of their crimes are happening now, and bishops in many cases are continuing to refuse to turn information over to the criminal justice system. Cases are stalled and cannot go forward because the church has such power to stop them. Children are still being harmed and victims cannot heal.

These criminal acts happened over and over to tens of thousands of children in the past, continue now and will continue until Pope Francis and the bishops act fiercely to insist that



*Vatican quizzed by UN*



*Pope: Church can't interfere with gays*

children and their safety come first, and that priests and protecting the image and power of the Catholic Church come a distant second.

Pope Francis must take action and mandate every bishop to immediately defrock any priest who has sexually abused children in the past or in the present and let the civil authorities investigate any priest or bishop alleged to have sexually abused a child. It's common sense. Nothing else will show the world that the Catholic Church is serious about its promise to address this issue.

Pope Francis will need to begin at home and release whatever records the Vatican possesses on priests and bishops accused of these crimes, wherever they are in the world. Anything short of this speaks of lip service and platitudes.

Francis also needs to chastise and demote bishops guilty of protecting priest abusers and working against the criminal justice system -- not honor and promote them. Cardinal Mahony was recently honored in celebrating Mass with Pope Francis -- and yet it is documented that he withheld information and transferred priests within and outside his diocese. At least Mahony acknowledged in a statement in 2013 that he had been "naive" about the lasting impacts of abuse and then met with 90 victims. But Pope Francis' speeches and actions to date do not reflect a spirit of compassion for, or understanding of, the impact on survivors.

Any positive changes in the Catholic Church to protect children and hold the church accountable have come about largely because of the tireless work of SNAP, Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests. These are brave and courageous men and women who tell their stories of abuse without shame. We can also thank the Catholic community of laypeople who want their children to be safe and their church to become the church it can be: a beacon of hope for its members and the world.

Now, it's the Vatican that must take action, as the U.N. report urges, to show us that its apologies are matched by actions to both stop the abuse of children and the church's coverup.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Mary Dispenza.

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