

10-1-07 - SoCal's other wayward bishop
By Gustavo Arellano, Los Angeles Times

Tod D. Brown, the Catholic bishop for Orange County, makes Cardinal Mahony look like a saint.

In early 2004, in front of dozens of reporters and parishioners, Bishop Tod D. Brown of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange nailed a "Covenant with the Faithful" to the door of the Holy Family Cathedral in the city of Orange. This publicist-cooked document contained seven "theses" vowing to create a new era of openness in a diocese long plagued by leaders who protected pedophile priests at the expense of innocents. "We will be open, honest and forthright in our public statements to the media," the fifth thesis promised, "and consistent and transparent in our communications with the Catholics of our Diocese."

But time and time again, Brown has shown that his emulation of Martin Luther was little more than hot, sulfuric air. This was never more apparent than last month, when his excellency decided that the covenant applies to everyone but himself and his friends.

In Orange County Superior Court, church lawyers tried to seal a deposition Brown gave for a civil lawsuit against the Orange diocese and its scholastic jewel: Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana. The plaintiff in the case, a former student, alleges that church officials ignored her abuse at the hands of a coach for Mater Dei's powerhouse boys' basketball program during the mid-1990s (the coach, Jeff Andrade, admitted to having sex with her).

Depositions have continued for more than a year, yet none were more explosive than Brown's. In it, the bishop admitted that someone had accused him of sexual abuse while he was a priest in Bakersfield in the 1960s, but that he never publicly disclosed the allegation because it was "embarrassing."

Brown also revealed that he allowed Msgr. John Urell (a popular priest at St. Norbert's in Orange) to seek psychological treatment in Canada and bail out of finishing a July 27 deposition because Urell suffered from "acute anxiety." The monsignor, by the way, was the Orange diocese's point man on sex abuse for more than a decade and was personally involved in the cover-up.

Church spokesmen tried to justify Brown's actions by posting an Orwellian statement on the diocese's website: "The 'Covenant with the Faithful' does not require the disclosure of allegations which have no credible or factual basis." Never mind that the bishop has disclosed noncredible allegations about other priests during his tenure.

Southern Californians have blasted Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony for years because of his own cover-ups, but it's time they include Brown in their bill of particulars. For all of his eminence's spinning and shuffling, even Mahony is better at repentance and transparency. When a woman in 2002 accused Mahony of abusing her, the cardinal

cooperated with authorities and told the public about the ultimately baseless charge. In 2004, the Los Angeles archdiocese released a 34-page study disclosing every priest, brother, seminarian or monk ever accused of molestation, including names, years during which the alleged molestations happened and number of accusers per suspect.

A similar Orange diocese report, on the other hand, came in the form of a one-page news release giving just the names of 22 priests accused of sex with minors, bunched together in a single paragraph without explanation.

Mahony also allowed the dedication of a shrine to abuse victims at Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels; nothing of that sort exists at Holy Family Cathedral. Although Mahony fought being deposed for years, he didn't bother trying to seal his testimony like Brown did.

And, on a purely devil's advocate note, Mahony did his double-talking and pedophile-protecting with the smoothness of a Little Italy don, never resorting to Covenant-with-the-Faithful gimmickry. Brown, meanwhile, bumbles around like Fredo Corleone every time he tries to assert leadership.

Shortly after finalizing a \$100-million settlement with 90 victims in 2005, Brown, in a news conference, consoled a victim who had once served on the diocese's Sexual Misconduct Board. The following day, his spokesman told the Toledo Blade that her settlement did not "imply any guilt on anyone's part." Brown never reprimanded his spokesman for the insult.

Unfortunately, most of Orange County's 1.3 million Catholics don't know about their leader's transgressions or -- worse -- either don't care or try to dismiss the charges as anti-Catholic rhetoric. But I have faith. Brown may persist in trying to tell things his way, but truth will out. And his ever-evolving Covenant with the Faithful will flail in the hot wind.

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