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We are here today with Rita Milla who in 1984 became the first woman in the nation to file a lawsuit against the L.A. Archdiocese and Catholic priests, thereby exposing to the public for the first time the previously secret priest sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church.

Rita was 16 years old and a devout Catholic parishioner who wanted to become a nun when she was first sexually abused by Father Santiago Tamayo, a priest in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Two years later Father Tamayo then took this vulnerable young girl and introduced her to 6 other Catholic priests who also preyed on her and sexually abused her. As a result, Rita became pregnant by one of those predator priests, Father Tugade and Rita ultimately gave birth to their child after Rita was sent out of the country by the priests to hide her pregnancy.

In 1984 we filed a lawsuit on behalf of Rita against the L.A. Archdiocese and the 7 Catholic priests who had abused her. On the day that we filed this lawsuit all 7 priests suddenly disappeared from their parishes making it difficult or impossible to serve them with the lawsuit.

Although the Archdiocese later said they would help find the missing priests we now know that the L.A. Archdiocese knew where many of the priests were and that the Church aided in the cover up and the obstruction of justice.

For example in 1985, then L.A. Archbishop Roger Michael Mahony stated to the L.A. Times, that he did not know what had gone on before he came to the diocese in 1985 “but we do not advise priests to flee their responsibility. I didn’t think it was a matter of cover-up precisely.”

However, confidential L.A. Archdiocese files in Rita’s case, which we just received within the last month, demonstrate that Cardinal Mahony did in fact have knowledge of a cover-up and participated in it.

For example, we now have a memo to him dated November 8, 1987, in which Archbishop Mahony in his own writing indicates that he concurs that Father Tamayo (who had fled to the Philippines to avoid being served with our lawsuit) receive financial support from the Church while Tamayo was in hiding.

One month later (on December 28, 1987) Rev. Msgr. Thomas Curry of the L.A. Archdiocese then sent a letter to Father Tamayo in which the church agrees to pay him a salary beginning Dec. 1, 1987 warning Father Tamayo who wanted to return to the U.S.

that he should not do so because “you are liable to personal suits arising out of your past actions. Therefore it is not advisable at all that you return to the United States. Such suits can only open the wounds and further hurt everyone concerned, including the Archdiocese.”

We also have other L.A. Archdiocese internal documents (May 3, 1984) that state: “Suggestions were given to all priests that they leave their assignments until such time as publicity and the trial have subsided. . .” These instructions were given immediately upon press release by Monsignor John Rowden, with the knowledge of his eminence, Cardinal Manning. Further, we now have memos from the L.A. Archdiocese attorney, John P. McNicholas (March 28, 1986) to the Archdiocese stating that Rita’s case “has some potential adverse and far reaching implications and these should be brought to the attention of Archbishop Mahony.” Another internal memo on April 3, 1986 addressed to Archbishop Mahony includes the McNicholas letter to Mahony.

Other internal documents show that the Church knew where many of the other priests were hiding and that there were letters from the Sacred Congregation of the Clergy in Rome asking the L.A. Archdiocese about Rita’s case, calling it an “unpleasant story.”

In short, we believe that Mahony knew precisely about the cover-up and payments to Tamayo to stay away and Mahony participated in it.

For these reasons and more, Rita and I do not believe that Mahony should be in Rome to vote for the new Pope. Also while Pope Benedict XVI has now retired to his castle in Italy, the scandal remains as a long lasting stain on the Church in Rome and in many countries world wide.

The retiring Pope said this morning that the Church is “a living body” but to that we add that the children abused by priests are also living bodies and they must be protected by the Church.

The new Pope must provide new and meaningful leadership in handling the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. The new Pope should conduct a complete investigation and be completely transparent with the public about the crimes committed by priests and the Church hierarchy against Catholic children. In addition, he needs to be forthcoming about the Church’s role in the cover-up and obstruction of justice and make the Church fully accountable to those whom they have hurt. Words and prayers are not enough. The Church’s child victims deserve not just a view of the pomp and circumstance in selecting a new Pope, but meaningful action by the Church to address the long lasting harm done to the child victims and a policy and plan to make sure that the Church never allow priests to prey on innocent children again.

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