**A Reflection on the Vatican Report on Former Cardinal McCarrick**

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A few days ago, the Vatican’s Secretariat of State released a comprehensive, 449-page report, entitled, *Report on the Holy See’s Institutional Knowledge and Decision-Making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930-2017)*. McCarrick’s conviction by a canonical court and subsequent dismissal from the clerical state (the first ever for a Cardinal) brought his case to a close in February 2019, but left the entire Church wondering: “How could a man with such a long history of abusive behavior rise to such power and prominence within the Church hierarchy?” That is the question that the *Report* seeks to answer. It is not concerned with assigning blame, but rather, understanding how processes went awry and bad decisions were made. In so doing, it also shows a clear evolution in the Church’s approach to sexual abuse by high-ranking clergy over the past twenty years. So, even as we are justifiably outraged by the mistakes that were made in the McCarrick case, we can also take comfort by noting how the impunity that he enjoyed for so long finally started to crumble, and then collapsed completely.

The first time that McCarrick came under investigation was in the late 1990’s, when he became one of the leading candidates for a very prestigious assignment as the Archbishop of Washington, a post which usually brought with it the additional honor of being named a Cardinal. There were unsubstantiated rumors about McCarrick sharing a bed with adult men in his rectory and with seminarians at his beach house during his tenure as Bishop of Newark, in the late 80’s and throughout the 90’s. Unfortunately, Cardinal O’Connor of New York, who led the investigation, did not have any specific allegations of misconduct, and he could not obtain enough evidence to judge the credibility of the rumors. That’s not at all surprising, since there was no safe way for victims to report sexual abuse by clergy, especially a bishop, in those days. Back then, reporting abuse typically meant having to come before a high-ranking priest in your Diocese and pit your word against the reputation of a powerful cleric, whose character was assumed to be unassailable. In this case, that accused cleric would have been the Bishop himself!

The *Report* also reveals an additional, and very troubling, reason why O’Connor’s investigation failed to turn up sufficient evidence against McCarrick. Three of the four bishops who were interviewed deliberately withheld relevant information from the inquiry! They chose to protect their colleague’s reputation and the Church’s reputation at the expense of the victims. As we now know, that approach to sexual abuse cases was the norm prior to 2002, when the U.S. Bishops adopted the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Typical of abuse investigations in the 1990’s and earlier, nothing was divulged to the public, and no formal canonical investigation was ordered. Some of the unverified evidence, including anonymous letters from victims, was even destroyed, per Church policy at the time. However, Cardinal O’Connor took the extraordinary step of warning Pope John Paul II against elevating McCarrick to the post in Washington, because he felt that there might be something to the allegations, even though he couldn’t prove them. Two high-ranking officials in the Vatican also counseled the Pope to remove McCarrick from consideration in Washington, but only to protect the Church from what they assumed to be false rumors. The Pope agreed to take McCarrick off the shortlist of candidates, until McCarrick got wind of the allegations against him and sent a personal letter to the Pope to profess his innocence. That’s all it took to clear his name. John Paul disregarded all of the warnings about McCarrick and selected him for the coveted position in Washington, as well as a seat in the College of Cardinals.

Regrettably, this is how the Church operated prior to 2002. By 2005, things had changed quite a bit. When allegations about McCarrick’s past abuses of adults resurfaced, Pope Benedict XVI immediately asked for and received his resignation as Archbishop. However, once again, no formal sanctions were placed on McCarrick; no canonical investigation was ordered; and nothing was divulged to the public. McCarrick remained a Cardinal in good standing, and he received only verbal warnings to keep a low profile in his retirement – warnings which he completely ignored. As in the past, the instinct of Church officials, and the official Vatican policy, was to maintain secrecy and avoid scandal at all costs. So, by this point, Church leaders had learned to intervene quickly to stop abuse from continuing, but they still did not grasp the importance of transparency. The thinking was still, “What the faithful don’t know won’t hurt them.”

When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, McCarrick was already 80 years old, meaning that he was no longer eligible to participate in the conclave of Cardinals. However, he was still one of the most prominent and recognizable representatives of the Catholic Church anywhere in the world. According to the *Report*, Francis was informed about the old allegations against McCarrick, but he assumed (wrongly) that they had been dealt with appropriately by his predecessors. The fact that none of the allegations involved minors probably played a big role in his decision not to take any further action. But, when an accusation about McCarrick abusing a minor came to light in 2017, Francis took immediate and decisive action. Once the allegation was deemed credible and substantiated, Francis demanded McCarrick’s immediate resignation from the College of Cardinals and launched a formal (and very public) canonical investigation, resulting in a trial, a conviction, and McCarrick’s dismissal from the clerical state in February 2019.

Many people, upon reading a summary of the *Report*, will feel a need to attack or defend the three Popes who oversaw McCarrick’s rise to power and fall from grace, without considering the evolving ethos of the Church during their pontificates. I think that is a mistake, for all of us understand sexual abuse by clergy differently today than we did in 1999, in 2005, in 2013, or in 2017. For example, now we understand how hard it is for victims to come forward and tell their stories. Hence, we must have safe and compassionate processes to hear them and to support their healing. Even our Bishops are finally starting to understand the need for transparency. The faithful have made it clear that we would rather be scandalized by abusive behavior than to remain oblivious to it. And, we also understand the need to involve lay people, with real authority, in the investigation and adjudication of abuse claims. I think we are even starting to understand all abuse by clergy for what it really is – an egregious abuse of power. Whether the victim is a child or a seminarian or any other vulnerable person, abusive clergy are weaponizing their Roman collar and the immense power that it holds. And that simply cannot be tolerated any longer.

The very fact that this *Report* was made public is perhaps the clearest sign yet that the wall of secrecy and impunity has fallen. It should give us great hope, even as it rends our hearts once again. Let us continue to pray that the scourge of abuse will one day be eliminated from our Church, once and for all.