

Commonweal

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Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former nuncio to the United States, congratulates ex-Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick (CNS photo/Michael Rogel, PMS)

“Anger, shock, grief, shame.” These were the opening words ^[1] of Cardinal Blase Cupich’s August letter to Chicago Catholics after the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report on clerical abuse in that state. Cupich, who headed the Catholic Bishops’ Committee on the Protection of Children, wanted readers to know he understood their feelings—indeed, that they had every reason to be angry, shocked, and ashamed. This was the second abuse scandal American Catholics had to digest this last summer, coming not long after the revelation that ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had abused minors and young adults for decades. Soon there would be a third scandal: a letter from a former papal nuncio

charging that Pope Francis himself was complicit in covering up McCarrick's sexual transgressions and demanding that he resign. And so began another round of Catholic anger, shock, grief, and shame.

Strong feelings can be a spur to action. But they can also foster misreadings of the facts, blur judgment, and trigger rash reactions. Unfortunately, in too many instances, that is what has happened. For example: we've all read newspaper articles, editorials, and op-eds in which it is claimed that the Pennsylvania grand jury found that three hundred priests had sexually molested at least a thousand children over seven decades. In fact, what the panel found was enough evidence to *indict* the clerics and other church personnel named. While I have little doubt that most of the accused are guilty, the fact remains that the grand jury did only what grand juries are supposed to do: find evidence to make formal allegations. Which is why the relatively small number of the accused who are still alive and able to defend themselves demanded that their names be blacked out on the published report. Until found guilty, they have a right to their good names. But a great many lay Catholics are too shocked, angry, and ashamed to acknowledge this.

Moreover, the way Pennsylvania's attorney general, Josh Shapiro, presented the report—and the way it was often described in the press ^[2]—made it easy to assume that the grand jury had unearthed three hundred *new* clerical abusers, when in fact most of the abuse covered in the report occurred in the last century and roughly eight out of ten of the alleged abusers are dead. It was easy to overlook the good news in an otherwise disheartening report—namely, that since the U.S. bishops established stringent new procedures for handling allegations of sexual abuse in 2003, only two priests from the seven dioceses studied have been accused.

None of this diminishes the horror of child abuse or the guilt of priests who have committed such crimes. If anything, the sickening stories recounted in the Pennsylvania report are vivid reminders of how little those bishops who covered up these crimes understood or cared for the victims. Yes, they sought to protect the church from scandal—only to produce a far greater scandal—and yes, they sought to maintain the image of the priesthood, only to see it turned into a metaphor for pederasty. But the real horror is that, unlike most human beings, too many bishops simply could not identify with the youthful victims of predatory priests, or with their outraged parents.

And yet, as I read the grand-jury report, there was very little in its nine hundred pages, apart from some appalling details and the names of specific priests, that Cardinal Cupich or anyone else over the age of forty hadn't already learned from the *Boston Globe's* investigative stories in 2002 and from the two-year investigation by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, published in 2003. And again, apart from specific details about specific cases, we are not likely to learn much new if other state attorneys follow Pennsylvania's lead. Such reports remind us of something we cannot afford to forget about the U.S. church's recent history, but they should no longer surprise us.

One cannot deny that homosexuality has played a role in the abuse scandals and their coverup, and to dismiss this aspect as homophobia one would have to be either blind or dishonest.

The unmasking of ex-Cardinal McCarrick as a sexual predator is a far more consequential event. I say this for several reasons. First, his outing was the result of a church investigation, instead of a journalistic exposé. Second, the McCarrick case has prompted demands that cardinals and bishops who are sexually abusive, or who cover up for any other cleric guilty of such crimes, be subject to

automatic procedures similar to those the American hierarchy has already imposed on abusive priests, including dismissal from the ministry. The creation of such procedures would necessarily involve decisive action by the pope and require changes in canon law. Any outcome short of this would be a huge betrayal of the people of God, not to mention an invitation to civil authorities everywhere to press for further investigations into possible cover-ups by bishops past and present. Third, McCarrick's history of sexual abuse raises in a very concrete way the issue of homosexuality within the Catholic priesthood —although not in the way that many conservative Catholic writers suggest.

To begin with, McCarrick doesn't seem to fit the standard profile of a pedophile. In clinical terms, a pedophile is any adult who is sexually attracted to prepubescent children. According to the John Jay Report, only about 5 percent of cases of clerical sex abuse in the past seventy years involved prepubescent children. McCarrick's abuse of adolescent seminarians, dating back to a time when the church still maintained special seminaries for students of high-school age, *does* fit the clinical profile of an ephhebophile—that is, someone who is sexually attracted to postpubescent minors, typically between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Here again, we are often dealing with sick, sexually maladjusted adults.

Those too angry or impatient for such a distinction should pay heed, for it turns out to have great practical importance. Therapists have found that children who have been sexually abused before puberty—and before their brains are fully developed—have very little chance of establishing a normal psychosexual life. Similarly, those who abuse such children can never again be left alone with children for the remainder of their lives. But therapy can help ephhebophiles control their sexual impulses, and it can help their adolescent victims establish a normal life, including normal adult sexual relationships. And this holds true whether the abuser is heterosexual or homosexual, male or female.

In a recent [television interview](#) [3], Cardinal Cupich said that the data from the John Jay Report does not support the conclusion that the presence of homosexuals in the priesthood is the root cause of the church's abuse scandal. It isn't. Nonetheless, it is true that eight out of ten reported abuses by priests over the past seventy years *were* cases of males abusing other males. What accounts for this? In part it can be explained by the fact that in the fifteen years or so between the late 1960s and the early '80s, when most of the abuse took place, male adolescents were more readily available to priests in Catholic schools and seminaries than female adolescents. An even better though still incomplete explanation is that men who discover that they are sexually attracted to pre- or post-pubescent males are naturally drawn to occupations like the priesthood—and teaching and coaching and scouting—because of the trust accorded the members of these occupations, as well as the access to boys all these occupations provide.

One cannot deny that homosexuality has played a role in the abuse scandals and their coverup, and to dismiss this aspect as homophobia one would have to be either blind or dishonest. This is one reason the McCarrick case is so important. McCarrick's targets were young adults as well as adolescents, which fits the definition of homosexual abuse and rape. Like most middle-aged men, whether heterosexual or homosexual, he was attracted to younger bodies. (If this were unusual, advertising, television news, and even sideline football reporting would look very different.) Because some of his victims were minors, including one or two boys who were possibly pre-pubescent, McCarrick is now open to criminal charges. This is why he has been dismissed from the priestly ministry.

But what about all the young men with whom the bishop shared a bed at his beach house and

elsewhere? Some were surely coerced, some seduced. They were all initiated by a powerful church figure into a sexual double life to which McCarrick, as a bishop and cardinal, gave sanction by his acts. How many are still living that double life? We'll never know, and the main reason we won't is that when a priest violates his promise of celibacy, he is not subject to anything like the sort of clear canonical procedures available in cases of child abuse. As the Catholic journalist and canon lawyer J. D. Flynn put it in a [recent column](#) ^[4] in the *Catholic Register*, "Church law does not expressly establish that sex between a cleric and an adult is a canonical crime. As a consequence, bishops everywhere find themselves vexed, and frequently, about how exactly they should handle allegations of clerical misconduct involving adults—even in cases like Archbishop McCarrick's, where coercion is an operative factor."

A final suggestion: stop treating cardinals and bishops as royalty rather than, as Francis has preached, as servants of the church.

Which brings us to the two letters of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a former papal nuncio to the United States, charging that Pope Francis had lifted sanctions on McCarrick that had been imposed on him "in private" by Pope Benedict XVI—charges that Francis has so far refused to discuss in public. The nub of Viganò's first letter is that Francis knew of McCarrick's history of abuse—that he had to have known because Viganò himself had documented that history for his superiors at the Vatican—but that the pope chose to ignore it and even took McCarrick's advice about the selection of new bishops in the United States.

Viganò's second letter, written a month later from his place of hiding, attacked the pope for not responding to his accusations, claimed that the pope had slandered him (though without mentioning his name), and—most important—demanded the release of the documentation on McCarrick that he had supplied to Vatican officials. Finally, Viganò asked Francis to tell the rest of the church how he had responded to a request by a delegation from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for a thorough investigation into the Vatican's handling of the McCarrick case. This is one place where liberals and conservatives can and ought to join forces, demanding release of these documents and an explanation of how the ex-cardinal's case was handled.

Even so, I doubt we will ever really know what happened: anyone who has ever spent much time covering the Vatican knows the Curia is a honeycomb of rival factions—the Holy See, after all, is the last Renaissance court—where popes rule but do not necessarily get their way. Viganò's letters reinforce the notion that there are no uniform procedures for dealing with misbehavior, sexual or otherwise, by high-ranking church officials. As we saw when John Paul II delivered Cardinal Bernard Law to the safety of a plush Roman sinecure, popes create cardinals and, like God, are free to do with them as they will.

Viganò did not help his cause by entrusting the publication of his letters to various American media outlets representing this country's disgruntled Catholic right. In doing so, he made their disaffection with Francis his own, and his theirs, thereby blurring the lines between the messengers and the message. Cardinal Cupich was not alone among Francis loyalists who found it easy to dismiss Viganò's first letter in part because of where and how it was made public. Not long before the second letter appeared, however, Cupich publicly apologized for the words he had used in dismissing the importance of some of

the issues raised by Viganò's letter.

Among those issues is one that no one in the Catholic hierarchy seems eager to investigate: the extent to which there are gay networks operating within the American priesthood, its seminaries and chanceries, and within the Vatican itself. And to what ends? Perhaps the hierarchy is afraid of giving aid and comfort to right-wing zealots who would like to use the McCarrick scandal as an excuse to out and purge all homosexual priests and bishops. There can be no excuse for such a purge. We have all met gay priests who live chaste lives and honor their vows of celibacy, just as we know there are more than a few heterosexual priests who fail to honor theirs. But it wasn't just clericalism that allowed McCarrick to abuse seminarians and young priests for decades, even though his behavior was widely known within clerical circles. And it wasn't just his ecclesiastical clout that provided him protection. It was networks, too.

By networks, I mean groups of gay priests, diocesan and religious, who encourage the sexual grooming of seminarians and younger priests, and who themselves lead double lives—breaking their vows of chastity while ministering to the laity and staffing the various bureaucracies of the church.

During the nearly four decades I spent writing about religion for *Newsweek*, I heard numerous tales of “lavender lobbies” in certain seminaries and chanceries, told mostly by straight men who had abandoned their priestly vocations after encountering them. At one time or another, the whispering centered on networks in Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Chicago, or Pittsburgh, among other dioceses. One of the few priests to complain in public was the late Andrew Greeley, who spoke of gay circles operating in the administration of Chicago's Joseph Bernardin, a cherished friend of his. As far back as 1968, I heard similar rumors about priests serving in the Roman Curia, mostly from Italians, who are generally more relaxed about homosexuality than Americans and unsurprised when those leading double lives are outed. What concerns me, though, is not simply personal hypocrisy, but whether there are gay networks that protect members who are sexually active.

Here it is worth revisiting the career of Cardinal John J. Wright (1909–1979) who, like McCarrick, was the subject of numerous stories about his own sexuality. Again, these came mostly from former seminarians and priests of the Pittsburgh diocese, which had a reputation during Wright's decade there as a haven for actively gay clerics. That was especially true of the Pittsburgh Oratory, which Wright founded in 1961 as a religious center ministering to Catholic students attending the city's secular universities.

Wright was an intellectually gifted churchman whose reputation as a liberal in the Spellman era rested chiefly on his interest in literature and the arts and his voluminous essays on those subjects and others published in liberal Catholic magazines, including this one. In 1969, at the age of sixty, Pope Paul VI chose Wright to head the Congregation for Priests in Rome and elevated him to cardinal. It was there, in the frenzied initial years of the post-council era, that I first heard stories of his leading a double life rather openly with a younger lover. What interests me now is not the private details of this double life, but whether it influenced how he ran the congregation overseeing the selection, training, and formation of the clergy. Donald Wuerl, who recently resigned as archbishop of Washington D.C., would surely know the truth about Wright. Wuerl's first assignment after ordination at the age of thirty-one was as secretary to then Bishop Wright of Pittsburgh in 1966. The younger priest was said to be closer to the cardinal than the hair on his head. He became Wright's omnipresent full-time personal assistant when the latter moved to Rome, even sitting in for him during the papal conclave that elected John Paul II.

The question of how networks relate to cases like McCarrick's is one that veterans in the hierarchy ought to summon the courage to air. The laity has a right to a greater degree of transparency in these matters. *Total* transparency is probably too much to expect. But if structural reforms are necessary to protect the young from abuse, the scandals of the summer of 2018 ought to be seen as spurs to thoughtful action, not occasions for fruitless displays of anger, shock, shame, and despair. The danger of clerical double lives—of secrets that can be used as weapons to protect other secrets—should now be clear to everyone. There will be clerical hypocrisy as long as there is a church, but we can and should do more to combat it.

A final suggestion: stop treating cardinals and bishops as royalty rather than, as Francis has preached, as servants of the church. This is a particular failing of wealthy, politically conservative Catholics favored by outmoded organizations like the Knights of Malta that are basically in the business of trading hefty donations for face time with Catholic hierarchs. It came as no surprise that Viganò's letters were shepherded into print by wealthy right-wing Catholic funder Timothy R. Busch, cofounder and host of the Napa Institute, which—for \$5,000 a pop—brings disgruntled conservative Catholics together with like-minded American bishops for Latin-language liturgies, George Weigel lectures, and “after dinner cigars” with the archbishop of San Francisco. For invited prelates, the week is free.

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