News
Opinion



Cardinal Theodore McCarrick listens during a news conference in Washington in this May 16, 2006, file photo. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite. File)



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In the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandals, what seems like bad news for the church — seemingly daily headlines about clergy being disciplined — is actually good news.

The truly bad news of the scandal, of course, has been the horrible abuse of children, which will have negative effects on them for the rest of their lives. The good news is that perpetrators have been caught and exposed. Accusations are being investigated and the guilty are being punished. When the abuse scandal was first uncovered in the United States some 30 years ago, bishops in other countries denied they had a problem. What is clearly a worldwide problem is now getting attention at the highest level in the church, thanks to Pope Francis.

In this sense, we should be happy to see more bad headlines because it means more bad actors are being caught.

Some of the cases that have received media attention in recent months include:

-- Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, has been accused of sexually abusing a teenager almost 50 years ago. He cannot be tried under New York state law because of the statute of limitations, but the Archdiocese of New York found the accusation "credible and substantiated." Francis has told the 87-year-old cardinal he can no longer exercise publicly his priestly ministry. Whether additional penalties will be imposed is unclear. This case shows that in the future no one in the church can expect to continue as a priest after abuse.

-- Msgr. Carlo Alberto Capella, a 50-year-old official of the Vatican nunciature in Washington, was accused last August by the U.S. State Department of possible

violation of laws relating to child pornography. Because he had diplomatic immunity, he could not be tried under U.S. laws. Instead, he was tried and found guilty in a Vatican City State court of possessing and distributing child pornography. He was sentenced to five years in jail and fined 5,000 euros ($5,833). His case will also be examined by the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, which can also impose ecclesiastical penalties, including dismissal from the priesthood.

-- Cardinal George Pell, on leave as secretary of finances in the Vatican, is facing trial in Australia over alleged sexual abuse 40 years ago. The details have not been made public by Australian authorities. The church is waiting until the state legal process is completed before initiating a process of its own.

-- All the bishops of Chile have submitted their resignations at the request of the pope because of the bishops' failure to deal with abusive priests. The pope has accepted five of the resignations and may accept more. While at first defending the bishops during his January visit to Chile, the pope subsequently sent Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna to investigate the situation. After reading his report, the pope acknowledged his mistake, apologized and began meeting with Chilean victims of abuse.

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-- Archbishop Philip Wilson, 67, of Adelaide was found guilty by an Australian court of not reporting to the police the abuse of two boys by a priest in the 1970s. An apostolic administrator has been appointed to govern his archdiocese.

-- A Pennsylvania grand jury has prepared a report on the church's handling of abuse in six dioceses in the state. Its publication has been temporarily held up by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

In a letter to Catholics in Chile, Francis has decried the "culture of abuse and cover-up" that has existed in the church. He acknowledges that the church did not listen to the victims of abuse. "With shame, I must say that we did not hear and react in time," he wrote.

Back in January, I acknowledged that Francis had a blind spot on sexual abuse and that there was no good process for dealing with bishops who failed to protect children. While the process for dealing with bishops is still unclear, I can no longer

accuse the pope of having a blind spot. He now gets it because he listened to victims and to Scicluna. Francis should continue meeting with abuse survivors for the rest of his papacy because they need his pastoral attention and he needs to model what other bishops should do. He also needs to continue removing bishops who don’t deal with abusive priests.

The church must continue to be vigilant, listen to victims, report abuse to civil authorities and deal with abuse even if that means more bad stories in the media. Don't be surprised or disappointed if more cases appear in the future. That abuses and cover-ups happened is tragic, but that they are now being exposed and dealt with is good news.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]