News
Opinion



Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, celebrates Mass at Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Catholic Church in Washington Nov. 1, 2017. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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July 27, 2018
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Catholic conservatives have finally decided to take the clergy sex abuse crisis seriously. Why? Because their longtime nemesis Cardinal Theodore McCarrick has been accused of unspeakable crimes and because they think they can use this crisis to attack Pope Francis. It is deplorable.

At Catholic News Agency, their new editor J.D. Flynn penned an essay that gives the right-wing game away. Flynn made some fine points. I agree that it was wrong for the bishops in 2002 not to include themselves within the strictures of the Dallas Charter for Child Protection. And he is correct to note that we have not yet learned, and we deserve to know, to whom Bishop Paul Bootkoski of Metuchen and Archbishop John Myers of Newark shared the information that they were making settlements with seminarians, who were not minors, but who had alleged sexual misconduct by McCarrick.

But, then Flynn tries to spread the blame around. "Cardinal Joseph Tobin succeeded Myers in Newark in 2017, and Bishop James Checchio succeeded Bootkoski in Metuchen the year before," Flynn notes. "Cardinal Donald Wuerl succeeded McCarrick directly in Washington in 2006. Did those men have awareness of McCarrick's alleged penchant for young seminarians?"

He goes on to write, "Still, it seems virtually impossible to imagine that Wuerl was not informed about the settlements concerning his predecessor." And, about Tobin he writes, he "was reported to have been McCarrick's choice for leadership in Newark." Then he ropes in one of Pope Francis' closest advisers, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, for questioning, citing a New York Times story about O'Malley receiving a letter filled with allegations about McCarrick. "What remains to be clarified is whether O'Malley communicated both sets of allegations to Pope Francis, and they were not acted upon by Francis and the Vatican, or whether the allegations were, for some reason, not communicated to the pope," Flynn writes.

I would like to see that letter. I wonder if it actually included allegations or just rumors.

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Flynn is not the only writer making assertions based on speculation. At The American Conservative, Rod Dreher goes even further. You have heard of run-on sentences? Here is a run-on guilt-by-association slur:

> *McCarrick has long been said to be close to Francis. As I wrote the other day, McCarrick's longtime friend and protege, Bishop Kevin Farrell, was made a cardinal by Francis and made head of the Vatican's office in charge of family policy for the worldwide church. Farrell has endorsed Father James Martin's book advocating affirmation of LGBTs in the Catholic Church, and is overseeing next month's world family meeting in Dublin, where Father Martin will give a keynote speech.*

And this:

> *And what about Cardinal Tobin? As I wrote the other day, McCarrick's influence with Francis is believed to have been behind the swift rise of Archbishop Joseph Tobin on (sic) Indianapolis, who was created a cardinal by Francis, then moved to Newark, McCarrick's old see.*

Dreher, like Flynn, quotes from The New York Times story about a letter sent by Fr. Boniface Ramsey to Cardinal O'Malley and, finally, he updates his article with a comment from someone self-identified as "Augustinus":

> *Farrell, Tobin, and one more big one. Cupich. McCarrick is a main reason Cupich is in Chicago. The last three American cardinals all owe something to the patronage or intervention of McCarrick.*

I am not a reporter, but I have a pretty good sense of how certain episcopal appointments came about. It is true that McCarrick selected Kevin Farrell to be his vicar general and auxiliary bishop in Washington, but whoever came to Washington would have likely selected Farrell for that or a similar job: He is very bright, very organized and very pastoral. His transfer to Rome had nothing to do with McCarrick

and a whole lot to do with O'Malley, Wuerl and Cupich.

Why would Wuerl have known anything about the settlements in New Jersey unless McCarrick told him? The first, in 2005, was made when Wuerl was still Bishop of Pittsburgh and in 2007 he had just arrived in Washington. I suspect McCarrick did not tell anyone because it is pretty obvious he was lying to himself for the past 60 years and he would have no trouble lying to others when asked about the rumors.

"Reports" notwithstanding, McCarrick had nothing to do with making Joe Tobin a cardinal nor with his transfer to Newark. Pope Francis knew him personally from their having attended a synod together and, like many Latin American bishops, then-Cardinal Bergoglio knew then-Fr. Tobin from his time as the head of the Redemptorists, when he often visited members of his order who are very well represented throughout Latin America.

Ross Douthat, in The New York Times, joins this foolish chorus, claiming that Tobin considers McCarrick "a mentor" and that he lobbied for his elevation. Quick question for Douthat: When, precisely, did their careers even overlap? I have had mentors. Usually they lived in the same city or we worked at the same office. Douthat's story now includes a correction. He originally stated incorrectly that Tobin had been an auxiliary to McCarrick. When that error was corrected, perhaps they should have also corrected the claim about mentorship.

The idea that McCarrick had anything to do with launching Blase Cupich from Spokane to Chicago is ludicrous. The cardinal dominoes for that appointment fell in this order: Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga, O'Malley, Wuerl, and Francis George, with the late Archbishop John Quinn playing a role too.

Dreher, in a subsequent column, also attacked Bishop Robert McElroy, another champion of Pope Francis' vision for the Catholic Church. Oddly, he does not assert that McCarrick was responsible for McElroy's rise but he makes a series of assertions I know to be false or at least gravely misleading.

McCarrick may have claimed credit for some key episcopal appointments. I think he even claimed credit for the election of Pope Francis. But, you see what is going on here. Wuerl, O'Malley, Tobin, Cupich and McElroy are Team Francis, so if some of the stench of the McCarrick story can be applied to them, and thus to the pope, good. I do not remember the Catholic News Agency getting all in a lather when Archbishop John Nienstedt was removed from office: People "knew" about his antics for a long

time too. A law firm conducted an investigation and the results have never been made public. Will Catholic News Agency go for that report to now be made public? Bishop Robert Finn was never accused of personal misconduct but he was convicted in court of failing to report child sex abuse. Nienstedt and Finn were not liberals and there was no way to pin their cases on Francis or his closest U.S. advisors.

Curiously, Flynn does not acknowledge one big reason that many did not believe the rumors surrounding McCarrick: The source of many of them was Flynn's old stomping ground, the chancery in Lincoln, Nebraska. In 2001, when The Washington Post received a fax containing rumors about McCarrick and his beach house, the fax originated at the chancery in Lincoln. Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz was the bishop at the time and he hated McCarrick for other reasons. Bruskewitz also did not demonstrate any particular concern for the victims of clergy sex abuse. He was one of only two bishops who repeatedly refused to even conduct the annual audit mandated by the Dallas Charter, a pretty low bar for compliance. Flynn, unsurprisingly, fails to mention this fact.

I agree that there are some cardinals who should be questioned about what they knew or did not know about McCarrick, but I propose a different list: Cardinal Angelo Sodano, secretary of state to Pope John Paul II from 1991 until 2006; Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, substitute or "chief of staff" to Pope John Paul II from 1989 until 2000 and then Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops from 2000 until 2010; and, most especially, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, personal secretary to Pope John Paul II for his entire pontificate and, then, cardinal-archbishop of Krakow. We know that Sodano hated the one U.S. cardinal who tried hardest to block McCarrick, Cardinal John O'Connor. I do not know if O'Connor knew about the sexual misconduct allegations but he disliked McCarrick's ambition. We know that Sodano and Dziwisz both protected Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, and were paid handsomely for their efforts. We know that McCarrick raised large sums for both the Catholic Church in Poland and for the use of Polish hierarchs working in Rome. We know that Re was involved in all major decisions and, with the other two, essentially ran the church in the final years of John Paul II's pontificate as the pope's health deteriorated. But, oddly, neither Flynn nor Dreher nor Douthat mention these three.

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And, finally, there is the case of St. Pope John Paul II himself. I agree that McCarrick should resign his cardinalate or be stripped of it by Pope Francis. But, what about the pope who made McCarrick a cardinal? And who made Hans Groer a cardinal. And who made Keith O'Brien a cardinal. And who made George Pell a cardinal. And who made Bernard Law a cardinal. How many cardinals need to be disgraced for either committing sexual abuse or covering it up before someone questions the "Santo Subito" canonization of the late pontiff? St. Pope John Paul II refused to confront the evil that surrounded him and he lacked one of the principal skills a pope, or any leader, needs: John Paul II was a lousy judge of character. Seeking those who exemplified his "heroic priesthood," he bestowed power on sycophants and criminals. His Congregation for Bishops was keen on weeding out anyone who questioned *Humanae Vitae*, but they forgot to ask about raping children or making excuses for those who did.

I understand that there are theological reasons why it is impossible to remove the "St." from anyone's name. Besides, I am almost a universalist and hope there is room for everyone in heaven, even great sinners like me. What is more, holiness and moral probity are two different things, and holiness is what gets you into heaven. But, and it is a huge but, can we at least implement a moratorium on naming schools for "John Paul the Great." The cult of John Paul II should not be encouraged. Let's bring back the old, and very wise, rule that no causes for canonization will be considered until a person has been dead 100 years.

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The clerical culture as a whole stands indicted by the McCarrick scandal. My former colleague Tom Roberts published an essay last year that called upon the bishops to confront the sacramental reality of their betrayal and we are still waiting. But, hijacking the McCarrick scandal to dump on Pope Francis does not do anything to protect children, nor does it honor the victims of clergy sex abuse. Dreher, who has one of the more interesting minds on the Catholic right, seems intent on placing the blame for the scandal on gay clergy which is, I think, offensive and ridiculous. The Catholic News Agency is not really a news agency: It is the propaganda arm of the Denver Catholic mafia, which seeks to cannibalize the Catholic Church in this country for its sectarian, Jansenistic ends, honoring the magisterium of John Paul II and the politics of Archbishop Charles Chaput above all else. Still I was shocked at the degree to which Flynn's essay seemed infused with a sense of disgust that was

newfound. Has he not been paying attention lo, these many years while we at NCR have been reporting on the scandal?

There is much the church needs to do to confront the ecclesial cancer that is eating at its entrails. NCR's editorial endorses some of those things, as do I. The McCarrick case especially points to the need for some process by which rumors are distinguished from allegations but also, somehow, looked into. But, as long as conservative writers are more interested in distorting the crisis for ideological purposes, we should beware what they counsel.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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