Opinion



Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, celebrates Mass for the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matara at Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian Catholic Church in Washington Nov. 1, 2017. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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The scandal surrounding former cardinal Theodore McCarrick began with inappropriate bedfellows and is finishing with surprising ones. Among the cries being heard across the usual ideological lines of division is the call for some kind of supervision of the bishops by the laity. I oppose this call. I am also concerned about the continuation of commentaries that darken counsel instead of enlightening it.

Yes, obviously, the bishops should avail themselves of the skills of laypeople schooled in the art of investigation if they wish to examine how the so-called "open secret" about McCarrick's penchant for bringing seminarians to his beach house did not prevent his continued rise to positions of authority within the church. My colleague Heidi Schlumpf interviewed several lay members of the original National Review Board to monitor compliance with the Dallas Charter for Child Protection. The bishops could do worse than to reassemble that team now. They understood both canon and civil law and had investigative experts like Kathleen McChesney and Sheila Horan, who had both worked at the FBI. Their expertise is incomparable and their integrity beyond reproach.

It is obvious to see why people do not think the bishops can police themselves. This article in The Irish Times about Cardinal Angelo Sodano trying to get the Irish government to squash inquiries into sex abuse as part of negotiations for a concordat make one's stomach turn. Sodano, the man who was General Pinochet's stalwart ally, who covered up the crimes of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, and who we now know was willing to subvert the rule of law in Ireland, there is a man who should resign his cardinalate and be hailed before a grand jury!

On the other hand, Tim Busch, a man with a seemingly limitless fortune and severely limited intellectual depth, thinks the laity can rescue the church in this scandal and that he is the layman to do it. Perhaps he thinks this will be as easy as buying the Catholic University of America, a feat he accomplished with surprisingly little pushback from the hierarchs who technically own it. Rod Dreher, to his great credit, pointed out Busch's hypocrisy: disgraced former Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis John Nienstedt is a kind of personal chaplain to Busch's Napa Institute and the winery where it holds its conferences. There is no record of Busch calling for

release of the already completed report into Nienstedt's behavior towards seminarians.

The Catholic press is not much more responsible. At the Catholic News Agency, Ed Condon published an article about how this papacy is embroiled in scandal. He throws some slime towards Cardinal Sean O'Malley:

> *And O'Malley has faced criticism over reports that in 2015 his office received a letter from a priest detailing allegations against McCarrick, but issued only a staff member's response, saying that the allegation was not the cardinal's responsibility to address.*
>
> *If the president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, a member of the C9, cannot advance binding reforms in the Curia, or even instill a culture of moral responsibility in his own staff, some working in Vatican tell CNA they are left wondering whether meaningful change can be expected to get beyond rhetoric.*

Condon's allegations against O'Malley and his staff fall apart when you realize that Fr. Boniface Ramsey's letter did not contain any specific allegations against McCarrick, only vague, second-hand rumors, hearsay, gossip. It turns out the gossip was true, but is the Catholic Church to be turned into a gossip-mongering institution to satisfy conservatives intent on attacking any cardinal associated with Pope Francis? Yes, there needs to be an office that can investigate rumors when, in the absence of hard allegations, the smoke is too great to ignore. That doesn't mean O'Malley "cannot … even instill a culture of moral responsibility in his own staff."

At Crux, Ines San Martin writes, "Let me be clear: What McCarrick did is awful. What the hierarchy in the United States did to cover up for him is revolting." The hierarchy? Which hierarchs? The only four hierarchs we know knew something concrete regarding McCarrick were the two bishops that entered into settlements with his victims, former Newark Archbishop John Myers and former Metuchen Bishop Paul Bootkoski; the nuncio at the time, Archbishop Pietro Sambi; and the nuncio to whom letters were sent in 2000 and 2001 in an effort to keep McCarrick from being promoted to Washington, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo. (I am certain Montalvo would have forwarded any complaints to Rome because that is what nuncios do, but he also would have enjoyed doing it in this case because he detested McCarrick.) The latter two have died, and the first two have some answering to do, assuredly. But, it

is irresponsible to suggest there was some massive hierarchy-wide cover-up without actual evidence.

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The Catholic left does it too. Fr. Peter Daly published a column here at NCR in which he writes, "We knew, or should have known, about some of McCarrick's behavior," and later, that one of the reasons no one acted on what they "knew" was because "we liked McCarrick. Everybody liked him." What is with this "we"? Based on his own account, the only thing Fr. Daly "knew" was a snide remark that was made to him by a priest from Newark. In retrospect he seems to wish he had reported the remark to someone, but we don't live our lives in retrospect and, besides, I hope we do not become so puritanical that we feel the need to report every secondhand insinuation or disparaging remark. And, by the way, some of us did not like McCarrick at all. Daly even allows that the former cardinal was "glib" and he got that right. Is that the kind of personality trait we want in a religious leader? No one would ever accuse Pope Francis of being glib.

Related: With McCarrick scandal, #MeToo arrives for the church

There has been some fine reporting in recent weeks about McCarrick, but most of the commentary has been irresponsible or predictable. Those who blame gay priests for the entire clergy sex abuse scandal blame gay priests for covering up McCarrick's crimes. Those who think patriarchy causes everything from the common cold to the stock market crash think the McCarrick scandal places patriarchy in the dock. James Alison's breathtakingly honest and incisive commentaries in The Tablet are the exception that proves the rule [subscription required].

Last week, a friend visited and we drove up to Salem, Massachusetts. We visited the Witch Museum. The evil hysteria, all of it conjured by "spectral evidence," seemed oddly contemporary. The bishops need to extend the Dallas Charter to themselves explicitly, and find a similar mechanism for dealing with cases of sexual misconduct involving non-minor subordinates. That is part of the lesson from the McCarrick scandal. The other lesson is that the Dallas Charter worked. Designed to prevent and prosecute instances of child sex abuse, within a few months of such an allegation being lodged against McCarrick, he was pulled from active ministry. His red hat did not protect him.

Monday, aiming to complement Alison's articles on gay clergy, I will examine another aspect of the current iteration of clerical culture that allowed — and still allows — the rot to persist. But, rest assured, if you think lay oversight is some magical answer, think about which members of the laity will be recruited, and you might think again. And, readers should demand more than spectral evidence from any and all journalistic outlets.



An ad for the Cardinal Newman Society on Google (Screen grab/NCR)

Lastly, Not to be outdone in turning a hideous scandal into a moment for self-promotion and ideological battle, the Cardinal Newman Society has been buying ad space on Google. If you google "McCarrick" you may have seen it. "Now what's the real truth?" the ad asks. "Find out what (former) Cardinal McCarrick was up to for the last 50 years." You are redirected to their website where the real cause of the McCarrick scandal is revealed: The Land O' Lakes Statement on academic freedom at Catholic Universities. Damn. Why didn't I make that connection. There is a word for this kind of thing: Prostitution.

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

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