News
Vatican



Pope Francis responds to a question from a reporter aboard his flight from Dublin to Rome Aug. 26. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM DUBLIN — August 26, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

This story was updated at 6:00 p.m. CDT with additional quotes.

Pope Francis dismissed the accusations of a former Vatican ambassador that he covered up for ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, saying an 11-page document of unsubstantiated claims released by the prelate "speaks for itself."

Asked about the letter from Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano in a press conference aboard the Aug. 26 flight back to Rome after a two-day visit to Ireland, Francis advised journalists to "read the statement attentively and make your own judgment."

"I will not say a single word on this," the pope said of the letter. "I think this statement speaks for itself, and you have the sufficient journalistic capacity to draw conclusions."

"When some time passes and you have your conclusions, maybe I will speak," said Francis. "But I would like that your professional maturity carries out this task."

Vigano's letter, released on the second day of Francis' Aug. 25-26 visit, claimed that dozens of former and current high-level officials in the Catholic Church perpetrated over two decades a systemic cover-up of allegations against McCarrick.

The archbishop, who served as the Vatican's ambassador to Washington from 2011 to 2016, also accused Francis of ignoring the allegations against McCarrick and called on him to resign in order to "set a good example for cardinals and bishops who covered up McCarrick's abuses."

But at least several of the letter's accusations appear contradicted by the historical record, and it is also laced with ideological claims.

Francis spoke about Vigano's letter as part of a 45-minute conference in which he also discussed the Vatican's processes for judging bishops accused of covering up abuse, how laypeople should respond when they hear of abuse allegations, and what advice he would give to a parent of a child coming out as gay.

The pope was asked about how the Vatican holds bishops to account in the context of an NCR interview Aug. 26 with Irish abuse survivor Marie Collins, a former member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Collins, who was part of a group of eight Irish survivors who met with Francis for 90 minutes Aug. 25, revealed that the pope had said he is not planning to follow through on a 2015 proposal for the Vatican to create one tribunal tasked with judging bishops accused of mishandling abuse allegations.

Although Francis said he has "esteem" for Collins, he said the idea for such a tribunal is "not viable." He said that instead of having one dedicated tribunal, the Vatican is now instituting tribunals on a case-by-case basis, as needed.

Advertisement

The pontiff revealed that the last bishop to have been judged by such a process was Guam Archbishop Anthony Apuron, who the Vatican announced in March had been found guilty of "certain of the accusations" against him, which included sexually abusing young men decades ago.

Noting that Apuron is appealing the verdict, the pope said that because it is a "very, very difficult case," he had decided to "take the appeal upon myself."

"I took it upon myself and I made a commission of canonists to help me," Francis explained, adding: "It is a complicated case on one hand, but also not difficult because the evidence is very clear."

"But I cannot prejudge," he said. "I'll wait for the information, and then I will judge."

Francis said he had tried to explain his reasons for not creating one accountability tribunal to Collins during their Aug. 25 meeting, but "she did not understand that very well."

"Next time I see her ... I will explain it better," he said, adding: "I love her very much."

Speaking up about abuse

Asked about a French priest who is calling for Lyon Cardinal Philippe Barbarin to resign over allegations that he did not report knowledge of abuse by a priest to authorities, the pope spoke about how laypeople should respond to abuse allegations.

Barbarin has been ordered to stand trial in France on the case next January, alongside Cardinal Luis Ladaria, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and five other church officials.

"If there are suspicions ... I don't see anything bad in having an investigation, if it is done always on the fundamental principle that no one is bad if it is not proven," Francis said of the French priest's call.

The pope said that those investigating abuse must presume innocence until guilt is proven, and called the work of journalists looking into abuse cases "very delicate."

Asked how the people of God could work to protect children from clergy abuse, Francis responded: "When you see something, speak immediately."

He added, "Many times it is the parents who cover up the abuse of a priest."

He said he knows a person who had been abused for eight years and "for 40 years suffered this wound of silence because her parents did not believe her."

"It is true that for a mother, seeing this, better that ... the child is making something up," said Francis, but he advised: "Speak, and speak with the right people. Speak with those who can start an investigation."

"Speak with judges, or with the bishop," the pope advised. "If you have a good priest, speak with the priest."

"This must not be covered up," said Francis.

Caring for gay children

At the end of the press conference, Francis was asked what advice he might give to a father or mother whose son or daughter tells the family that they are gay.

"I would say first to pray," the pope responded. "Do not condemn. Dialogue. Understand. Make space for the son or daughter; make space so they express themselves."

"I would never say that silence is a solution," the pope continued. "Ignoring a son or daughter with homosexual tendencies is to neglect giving them paternity and maternity."

Suggesting a conversation the parent might have with their child, Francis offered: "You are my son. You are my daughter, as you are. I am your father, or mother. Let's talk."

"If you, mother or father, don't know how to do it, ask for help, but always in dialogue," Francis advised.

"That child has the right to a family," he said. "Don't chase them away from the family."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **World Meeting of Families 2018** feature series. View the full series.