News
Analysis



David Lorenz, holding the microphone, addresses a crowd gathered outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington Aug. 26. Joined by Catholics who showed up to support sex abuse victims, Lorenz, a survivor of clergy abuse, called on Cardinal Donald Wuerl to resign. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)

by Dennis Coday

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dcoday@ncronline.org
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Reporting for this story was done by NCR Vatican correspondent Joshua J. McElwee, NCR national correspondent Heidi Schlumpf, NCR staff writer Brian Roewe and NCR contributor Mark Dent.

During a recent appearance on the PBS NewsHour, correspondent William Brangham quizzed me about the accusations in a letter Archbishop Carlo Viganò had released a couple days earlier. "Do you see this as a demonstration of a schism within the Catholic Church right now?" he asked.

I hoped that panic didn't show in my eyes. I was having flashbacks to church history classes I had taken. Are we in a time comparable to the Great Schism of 1054 that split the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches? Are we headed to something like the Western Schism of 1378 with its three rival popes?

"Schism is a technical word. I wouldn't want to use that word," I responded. "But there is definitely in-fighting going on, a power struggle going on. Pope Francis has met a lot resistance since his election because of his reform agenda and what he represents."

I was taken aback by Brangham's question, and yet if he had been reading the same reports, reactions and statements that I had been reading over the last two days, I could understand why he was asking it.

As Massimo Faggioli, church historian from Villanova University told NCR (See Page 14): An archbishop publicly accusing a sitting pope of malfeasance and calling for his resignation, "This is something I don't remember in the last four, five, six centuries."

Viganò's major claims are that Pope Benedict XVI imposed sanctions on then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick because McCarrick had abused minors and had inappropriate relations with seminarians, and that certain officials in the Vatican bureaucracy and the U.S. hierarchy either blocked those sanctions or refused to act on them.

McCarrick's abusive behavior became public in June, when he withdrew from public ministry and eventually resigned from the College of Cardinals. According to Viganò, though, Pope Francis knew about McCarrick's crimes for years, and instead of punishing him, let him play kingmaker for U.S. episcopal appointments. For that, Viganò said, Francis must resign.

Competing statements issued by U.S. prelates following Viganò's bombshell advanced the impression of internecine combat.

Infighting, in real time

Just hours after Viganò's testimony was made public, Bishop Joseph Strickland sent a statement to his parishes in the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, saying he found Viganò's allegations "credible."

Strickland called for "a thorough investigation" of the allegations and he pledged to "lend my voice in whatever way necessary to … urge that its findings demand accountability of all found to be culpable even at the highest levels of the Church."

But on Aug. 27, Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, said Viganò's 11-page letter was filled with "factual errors, innuendo and fearful ideology."

Viganò said that homosexuals in the church were responsible for the child abuse crisis as well as many of the other ills in the church.

"These homosexual networks," he wrote, "which are now widespread in many dioceses, seminaries, religious orders, etc., act under the concealment of secrecy and lies with the power of octopus tentacles, and strangle innocent victims and priestly vocations, and are strangling the entire church." (See related story, Page 11.)

Tobin, who leads the archdiocese that McCarrick headed from 1986 to 2001 and that in the mid-2000s paid settlements to two men who said McCarrick sexually assaulted them years before when they were seminarians, expressed "shock, sadness and consternation" over Viganò's letter.



Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, former apostolic nuncio to the United States, is seen in a 2016 photo in Washington. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Revelations broke this summer that as Theodore McCarrick rose through the clerical ranks from New York parish priest to the ordinary of two New Jersey dioceses to cardinal-archbishop of the nation's capital and finally as a senior, jet-setting

diplomat for church and humanitarian projects and programs, he was also a serial abuser of young men, mainly seminarians under his charge, had Catholics reeling.

If that was punch one, punch two came Aug. 14 with the release of a wide-ranging Pennsylvania grand jury report that more than 300 Pennsylvania priests were accused of committing sexual assault and that their bishops covered up for them. The report detailed some of the most damning accusations brought against the Catholic Church to date.

Some 1,000 people were estimated to be victims in the report, which spanned 70 years and six dioceses — Allentown, Erie, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Scranton. The report was compiled mainly from church records, with some testimony from victims and witnesses.

The details were heart-stopping.

Fr. Chester Gawronski of Erie told young boys he abused he was giving them cancer checks. In Allentown, Fr. Michael Lawrence confessed his sexual abuse of a boy to a monsignor, who through the diocese ruled the experience wouldn't be a "trauma" for the victim. A priest in Greensburg impregnated a 17-year-old, married her and divorced her. Rather than being turned into authorities, he was transferred to a parish in another state.

Harrisburg priest Augustine Giella was found to have abused five daughters from a family of nine children that was active in the church community. Memorandums between church leaders showed knowledge of his abuse, but he didn't face legal issues until the family later reported him to police. The diocese ended up fighting to get what became a million dollar settlement down to $225,000.

Chancery officials and diocesan priests who were named in the report as having been accused of cover-ups later were promoted, some to higher ranks in the church, including Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik and former Pittsburgh Bishop Donald Wuerl, now a cardinal and archbishop of Washington.

"The men of God responsible for them not only did nothing," Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro said at a press conference Aug. 14, "they hid it."

"We all wish more charges could be filed," Shapiro said, "but due to the church's manipulation of our weak laws in Pennsylvania too many were out of reach."

Church leaders had the summer to prepare for the grand jury release — it was supposed to have been released in June, but legal wrangling delayed it until Aug. 14, and some names of accused priests were still redacted — and they went to crisis control mode.

Zubik spoke to media the day the report was released. "We cannot bury our heads in the sand. Swift and firm responses to allegations should have started long before they did."

"The Diocese of Pittsburgh today is not the church that is described in the Grand Jury Report," he said. "It has not been for a long time. Over the course of the last 30 years, we have made significant changes to how we prevent abuse and report allegations."

The grand jury made three recommendations: eliminating statutes of limitations for criminal cases of sexual assault in Pennsylvania, creating a two-year window for civil action for people who have previously been abused but unable to seek civil claims under the statute of limitations, and tightening mandatory reporter laws.

Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico, who as the only bishop to testify in front of the grand jury was singled out by Shapiro to praise his transparent behavior, said the recommendations should be looked at but declined to say he supported them.

Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, longtime victims advocate, had his own recommendation. "What the bishops ought to do as a group is get up and say we agree with everything in the report," Doyle said. "I anticipate they'll weasel out of it."

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Laity demand action

Bishop Ronald Gainer of Harrisburg ordered that the names of former bishops dating to the 1940s be stripped from church buildings, including a conference center and a retirement residence for priests. The Pittsburgh Diocese renamed Cardinal Wuerl North Catholic High School in suburban Cranberry Township to simply North Catholic High School.

Catholics, however, wanted more from their leaders.

Forty-three self-identified "young Catholics" posted an open letter to the U.S. bishops on the website of First Things, a right-leaning journal began by the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, to "take clear action" by conducting an independent investigation of who knew what and when about McCarrick. The bishops should engage in "formal acts of public penance and reparation," they stressed.

Some 5,500 theologians, educators and lay leaders called for all U.S. bishops to submit their resignations to Francis, much like Chile's 34 bishops did in May, after revelations of sexual abuse and corruption. Their collective resignation would be "a public act of repentance and lamentation before God and God's People," said a statement, posted in English and Spanish on the Daily Theology blog Aug. 10.

The organizers sent a cover letter and a print-out of the petition and signatures, about 330 pages, to the president and vice presidents of the U.S. bishops' conference, the apostolic nuncio in Washington, D.C., and to the Congregations of Bishops in Rome on Aug. 28 and 29.

Acknowledging that some bishops are "humble servants and well-intentioned pastors," the statement's signers still urged a collective resignation by all bishops because of the "systemic nature of this evil."

"Systemic sin cannot be ended through individual goodwill. Its wounds are not healed through statements, internal investigations, or public relations campaigns but rather through collective accountability, transparency, and truth-telling," the statement said.

The statement also expressed support for "sound proposals," such as those for external investigations like the one in Pennsylvania, which "would begin to convert this ecclesial culture of violence into one of transparency, accountability, humility, safety, and earned trust."

On Aug. 16, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, invited the Vatican to conduct an apostolic visitation, a "full investigation" into questions surrounding revelations of sexual abuse by McCarrick.

DiNardo, archbishop of Galveston-Houston, also said the bishops will take steps to create channels for easier reporting of abuse and misconduct by bishops, and will push for better procedures under canon law to resolve complaints made against bishops.

"We are faced with a spiritual crisis that requires not only spiritual conversion, but practical changes to avoid repeating the sins and failures of the past that are so evident in the recent report," the cardinal wrote.

DiNardo outlined three goals — guided by three principles of proper independence, sufficient authority and substantial leadership by laity — established by the executive committee, and said he would travel to Rome to present them to the Vatican, "and to urge further concrete steps based on them." The statement did not indicate when a trip would occur.

The possible Vatican apostolic visitation would work "in concert" with a group of predominantly laypeople identified by the bishops' National Review Board, which advises the bishops on preventing child sexual abuse, and who would be "empowered to act."

A "more developed plan" is to be presented during the bishops' annual meeting in November in Baltimore.

"We already know that one root cause is the failure of episcopal leadership … scores of beloved children of God were abandoned to face an abuse of power alone. This is a moral catastrophe," DiNardo said.

Fr. James Connell, a founding member of the Catholic Whistleblowers reform group, said he was skeptical of the plan outlined by DiNardo, including whether an apostolic visitation could have credibility. Instead, he has joined others in calling for more grand jury investigations nationwide, and that any investigation be handled by professionals, perhaps even the FBI.

"They can do their investigation from the Vatican, fine, but there also needs to be independent professional investigators who know how to investigate," Connell said.

On Aug. 20 Francis issued what is likely the boldest statement on clergy sex abuse to come out of the Vatican. He condemned the abuse as a crime and called the church to solidarity with victims.

"With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner, realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives," Francis wrote in a letter addressed to the People of God. "We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them."



Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh addresses the media Aug. 14 at the pastoral center in Pittsburgh. (CNS/Pittsburgh Catholic/Chuck Austin)

For all its boldness, however, the letter lacked specifics.

Irish abuse survivor Marie Collins praised Francis' candidness but said the letter is missing "the most important thing:" a plan to hold the perpetrators of the cover-up to account.

"Whether your intentions are good or not, what really matters is what you do," said Collins, who resigned in frustration from the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in 2017. "History will judge Pope Francis on his actions, not his intentions."

Viganò's bombshell drops

Meanwhile, an ad hoc group calling itself Catholics for Action used social media to organize protests outside cathedrals and other significant church buildings the weekend of Aug. 25-26. Demonstrations were held in Boston; Chicago and Naperville, Illinois; Philadelphia; South Bend, Indiana; St. Louis; St. Paul, Minnesota, and Washington.

Washington organizer Bob Cook told about 30 people outside the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, "Catholics, both conservative and progressive, are saying enough is enough. We're hoping a tipping point has been reached and all lay Catholics will follow Francis's call" to take a more active role in the church.

As Catholics for Action gathered on sidewalks outside churches, Viganò was dropping his bombshell in Rome. Social media exploded and news outlets around the world blared headlines about calls for Francis to resign.

What came next were competing, contradictory statements from chanceries across the country.

Bishop Thomas Olmsted of Phoenix issued a statement Aug. 27 saying that he has known Viganò since 1979 when they both worked at the Secretariat of State of the Holy See. While he has "no knowledge of the information that [Viganò] reveals … so I cannot personally verify its truthfulness, I have always known and respected [Viganò] as a man of truthfulness, faith and integrity."

Olmsted urged that "every claim that [Viganò] makes be investigated thoroughly."

Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich released a statement Aug. 26 detailing factual errors in Viganò's timeline about his appointment as archbishop of Chicago. But he told NCR he was even more shocked by the letter's "derisive" tone.

"In any encounter I've had with [Viganò], he's always been very cordial and pleasant," Cupich said. "There has never been any indication to me the level of scorn that's in his letter about me. I was just stunned. I have no idea where that's coming from."

Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, begins his statement of Aug. 27 by renewing his "fraternal affection for the Holy Father in these difficult days."

"However, I must confess my disappointment that in his remarks on the return flight from Dublin to Rome, the Holy Father chose a course of 'no comment,' " to Viganò's allegations, he wrote.

He added that he knows Viganò "both professionally and personally, and I remain deeply convinced of his honesty, loyalty to and love for the Church, and impeccable integrity."

"Viganò has offered a number of concrete, real allegations … and an investigation, according to proper canonical procedures, is certainly in order," Morlino said.

Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego cited Viganò's letter as example of "ideological warriors within the Church on both sides … [using] the tragedy of victims of abuse to promote their goals."

The letter, McElroy said, is clearly an effort "to settle old personal scores."

"The dedication to comprehensive truth has been subordinated to selective targeting of enemies and tendentious distortions of the truth," McElroy said.

Some worried that Viganò's letter, ostensibly a call for accountability, was really a distraction from protecting children and bringing accountability to the church.

David Gibson, a former religion writer and now director of Fordham's Center on Religion and Culture, said Viganò's letter is evidence itself of the church's clerical culture. "It shows that it's not just an old boys' network, but a clique of nasty, gossipy courtiers," he told NCR. "That's something Francis has denounced."

The survivor group Ending Clergy Abuse called Viganò's letter "infighting between curia factions that are exploiting the abuse crisis and victims of clergy sexual abuse as leverage in the struggle for church power."

"Today's news dramatically demonstrates the secrecy and disorganization that dominates the culture that has created the child sex abuse crisis — and that culture is the culture of the Vatican," said the Ending Clergy Abuse statement.

[Dennis Coday is NCR editor. His email address is dcoday@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @dcoday.]

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