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Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick prays during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual fall assembly in Baltimore, Nov. 14, 2011. (AP/Patrick Semansky)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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He has used the power of his arm,

He has routed the arrogant of heart.He has pulled down princes

From their thrones

And raised high the lowly.

Woven deep into the fabric of this prayer of Mary is a disposition about God, informed by the Hebrew Scriptures and consistent throughout the life and ministry of her son, Jesus, that turns the presumptions of the world on end. This young Jewish woman is given audacious words that put the powerful, religious and civil, on notice.

Her words have a searing significance this year for U.S. Catholics who learned that one of the mightiest princes of the church, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, was being removed from ministry, stripped of his title and sent off to a remote friary in the wake of credible accusations of sexual abuse of minors and inappropriate sexual activity with seminarians.

Theodore McCarrick is NCR's choice for Catholic newsmaker of the year.

His fall from grace, deeply disturbing in its details, would have warranted special notice if only because he was the first U.S. cardinal so disciplined. But his story takes on a greater significance because it unmasks, in ways that previous cases of episcopal malfeasance have not, the secrecy, deceit and corruption of the clerical system. It illustrates the inability of two previous papacies to deal seriously with bishops and archbishops who were abusive themselves or complicit in covering up abuse by others.

McCarrick's biography, when finally put under microscope and with the aid of documents and testimony previously unavailable, unveils a culture that knew something was terribly amiss but failed to act. It not only protected one of its own but promoted him turn by turn for two decades. He rose through the ranks until he became, in the words of The New York Times, "one of the most prominent public faces of the Catholic Church in America."

Unlike others who were disciplined less severely for covering up abuse, McCarrick was removed from ministry for his own acts of abuse, that allegedly included molestation of the first child he ever baptized, abuse that allegedly began when the boy was 11 and continued until he was 31.

He also was credibly accused of abusing a 16-year-old altar boy in 1971 and two former seminarians. One of them, a former priest, had received an $80,000 settlement in 2005. The other received a $100,000 settlement in 2007.

> The harsh reality couldn't be avoided. The secretive, all-male, allegedly celibate clergy culture, where bishops can enjoy privileges once reserved for royalty and the extremely wealthy, was coming apart. There is no place left to hide.

Regular readers of this publication will know that for years we have held that the root of the problem lies beyond all of the institutional adjustments forced upon the church by legal proceedings and public indignation. The scandal, horrible as it is, is merely symptomatic of deeper maladies within the clerical culture, especially at the hierarchical level.

McCarrick's story provides ample demonstration of that point. We know from Catholic News Service reporting that a papal nuncio was informed as early as 1994 of the rumors of McCarrick's sexual misconduct, which included inappropriate behavior with seminarians at his beach house in Sea Girt, New Jersey. But in-house investigations in the Archdiocese of New York cleared him.

By that point, McCarrick, had already served (1981-1986) as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey, appointed to that post by Pope John Paul II, who later moved him to the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, where he served from 1986 to 2000. John Paul named him to head the Archdiocese of Washington in 2001, the same year he made him a cardinal.

Throughout his climb up the episcopal ladder, there were whispers and rumors and worse — credible accusations that ultimately resulted in settlements. McCarrick is among a list of cardinals — Hans Groër, Keith O'Brien and Bernard Law — appointed by John Paul who were removed either for sexual misconduct or covering up abuse. Another, George Pell, is on trial in Australia for charges that he abused youngsters. It

just took the world a little longer to learn about McCarrick.

That delay could be an advantage for the church. The timing is important, and McCarrick's case, which broke in June, may have created the fault line that opened wide with the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report in August. While reporting on the scandal has been thick on these pages and the pages of a lot of newspapers around the country for 33 years, something snapped this summer. Maybe it was that after decades of accumulating evidence, the reality became undeniable.

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After all of the denial, lying, cover-ups, excuses, promises to change, apologies for "mistakes made," and looking for blame and causes in every imaginable corner of the church, the harsh reality couldn't be avoided. The secretive, all-male, allegedly celibate clergy culture, where bishops can enjoy privileges once reserved for royalty and the extremely wealthy, was coming apart. There is no place left to hide.

Insiders knew that — many of them saw it coming — and wondered when the scales would tip toward total disclosure. But it remained largely a deep-in-the-Catholic-weeds understanding of things. Theodore McCarrick helped move it into the open. The gregarious, charming, globe-trotting clerical diplomat, who helped raise enormous sums for the church and its agencies, was everyone's idea of the sophisticated modern churchman. He could walk through all levels of society, high and low, and across faith boundaries with grace and confidence.

When he tumbled off the pedestal, the wider world noticed. So many felt utterly defrauded. The anger and betrayal went off the charts. If there is a sentiment that now bridges the divides in the Catholic Church it is this: Things must change.

Exactly how is quite another — and at the moment, unknowable — piece of the ongoing trauma that Catholics have endured. But the sentiment seems set in an unshakable way: Things must change.

It would be a mistake, however, to view McCarrick and his fate with any degree of satisfaction. For while he symbolizes hierarchical corruption and the "arrogance of heart" that has taken the clergy culture so off course, he also represents a complex

challenge to the Catholic community. McCarrick, for all of the failings that have been revealed, was in many ways a good man who accomplished a great deal for the church. In that sense, the story is not so simple nor dualistic as McCarrick-the-sinner and the rest of us. It is just as much about all of us, capable of evil and good, as well as the clergy who inhabit a terribly damaged culture.

McCarrick's fall provided the world with a rare look at a privileged life, protected by clerical secrecy and advanced by accumulated power and access to monied interests. It was all fertile soil for corruption. He was the beneficiary of a system that remains in place. If it is not radically reformed, changed well beyond alterations to institutional structures and norms, the corruption will continue in one form or another.

Theodore McCarrick paid a huge price for his deception and betrayal of trust. He did not, however, act alone. He was enabled by peers who operated within an ethos that encouraged secrecy and protection of hierarchical privilege at all cost.

We'll see in the coming weeks if our U.S. bishops, who hold a retreat in January, and the bishop leaders globally, who meet in February, have the will, not to mention the faith, to confront the now undeniable corruption in their culture. They won't have many more opportunities to engage the radical reforms necessary to begin rebuilding credibility and trust within the community.

For the moment, the rest of us will take solace in the conclusion of Mary's prayer, which envisions a God of boundless love and of mercy that extends from Abraham to all of his descendants for all time.

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