News
Vatican



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



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Two years after reports of sexual abuse by Theodore McCarrick surfaced into public view, the Vatican's long-awaited report on the now-defrocked former cardinal was released Tuesday. As the public sifted through the dense and detailed document, abuse survivors and their advocates called it an important moment that must lead to further action and investigations, perhaps even from the nation's next president.

Much of the early reaction centered on the significance of the report itself, rather than specific findings and conclusions. At 400-plus pages, the report presents an extensive portrait of McCarrick's rise within the church's ranks and how allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct followed him throughout his career but did not derail it, even as the highest levels of the church learned of them.

In perhaps its most explosive discovery, the report stated that Pope John Paul II made the decision in 2000 to appoint McCarrick as archbishop of Washington, D.C., despite a warning a year earlier that he had been accused of pedophilia and sharing beds with seminarians.

'Awareness is meaningless without concrete action'

Survivors of sexual abuse and their advocates called the report a milestone. They said it told a story too familiar to too many victims, and they cautioned against viewing it as a condemnation of one pope alone, or as the end of the abuse saga.

Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of Bishop-Accountability.org, a web archive that houses troves of documents on the abuse crisis, called the report "the most significant document on the abuse crisis to come from the Church," and expressed hope that it represents in the Catholic Church "a shift to genuine transparency."



Anne Barrett Doyle joins protesters in Baltimore Nov. 12, 2018, outside a meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

At the same time, Barrett Doyle said the report represents "a powerful argument" against *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, the 2019 apostolic letter that issued mandates and laws for reporting and investigating sexual abuse, and the self-policing model of accountability.

"It must be revised. Accountability won't happen without external oversight," she said.

In an initial statement, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests called the report "one step in the right direction" by raising awareness about McCarrick's history. The group said any prelate who knew of McCarrick's abusive past and did not act on it should be removed.

"Awareness is good. But awareness is meaningless without concrete action," SNAP said.

SNAP and fellow survivors advocate group Ending Clergy Abuse penned a letter to President-elect Joe Biden calling on him to launch a nationwide investigation into sexual crimes and cover-up within the church. It also requested that Biden, who is Catholic, consult abuse survivors in the selection of the next U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

The letter recounts an encounter in March between Biden and Mark Belenchia, an abuse survivor leader of SNAP's Mississippi chapter. According to the letter, Belenchia told the former vice president, "Survivors of clergy abuse need you."

To which Biden replied, according to the letter, "I know all about SNAP. I am behind your efforts 100 percent. ... I totally get it. I am your guy."

The advocacy groups told Biden, "Victims of clergy abuse, along with the U.S. Church, are ready to move forward. But we cannot do so without your help, the help you promised Mark and thousands of us that March day."

Juan Carlos Cruz, a Chilean clergy abuse survivor, said on Twitter that reading through the report left him "disgusted."

Barrett Doyle said that the next step for the Vatican should be to publish its investigation into the Chilean church.

As for the McCarrick report, she said it was noteworthy that it named enablers of the former cardinal's abuse and "quotes liberally" from documents and testimonies of abuse survivors and whistleblowers. Still, she said it did not examine McCarrick's own handling of abusive priests in the dioceses he led. And while the report shows

how church officials limited past investigations to maintain plausible deniability, particularly by John Paul, Barrett Doyle said it attempts to let Francis "off the hook" for not investigating earlier rumors about McCarrick.

Similarly, Peter Isely, a longtime survivors' advocate and founding member of Ending Clergy Abuse, told NCR it was important to remember that John Paul is not the only pope in the report.



Peter Isely at the Vatican in February 2019 (CNS/Paul Haring)

"These three popes are linked together in this case. And that cannot be lost sight of," he said.

In its own statement, Ending Clergy Abuse points out the report does not mention the account of James Grein, who in a lawsuit filed in December said he directly told John Paul II and two Vatican officials that McCarrick had sexually abused him as a child. It said a bright spot in the report was New York Cardinal John O'Connor, who told John Paul not to promote McCarrick.

The advocacy group urged U.S. attorneys involved in litigation against the church, including state-level investigations in New York and New Jersey, to pursue depositions from senior church officials, including Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

"It's really important for people to realize that this is not done," Isely said.

John Carr, a longtime adviser in the bishops' conference who worked closely with McCarrick, said in a statement that the report "is long and a long time coming."

Carr, who in September 2018 revealed he was sexually abused as a high school seminarian, said that McCarrick's continued lies and refusal to accept responsibility "are a greater betrayal of trust than what I experienced more than 50 years ago as a young seminarian."



John Carr speaks during a Leadership Roundtable panel discussion on the abuse crisis in February 2019. (CNS/Courtesy of Leadership Roundtable/Ralph Alswang)

"For me, this is personal, professional, and institutional. I can only hope and pray that this Report tells the truth about terrible past failures and clearly recognizes and apologizes for the horrific pain and loss of victim/survivors," Carr said, before adding, "This must become another essential step toward greater transparency and accountability in our Church."

Leadership Roundtable, an organization that promotes best practices and accountability in church management, said in a statement the McCarrick report

reinforces "an urgent need for a new culture of accountable, transparent and co-responsible leadership at every level in the Catholic Church."

Added Kim Smolik, a partner of Leadership Roundtable, "The Church must learn from these leadership failures and institute comprehensive reform of its governance structures and selection and review of bishops," as well as expand oversight that incorporates both lay and ordained people.

US bishops offer prayers and apologies

In a brief statement, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said he welcomed the report, calling it "another tragic chapter in the Church's long struggle to confront the crimes of sexual abuse by clergy."

"To McCarrick's victims and their families, and to every victim-survivor of sexual abuse by the clergy, I express my profound sorrow and deepest apologies. Please know that my brother bishops and I are committed to doing whatever is in our power to help you move forward and to ensure that no one suffers what you have been forced to suffer," Gomez said.

Gomez said the bishops' conference is studying the report's findings. He expressed gratitude to Francis for calling the Catholic Church to greater accountability and transparency in addressing abuse and handling claims at all levels of the church.



Pope Francis greets Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez at the Vatican Jan. 27. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"This report underscores the need for us to repent and grow in our commitment to serve the people of God," Gomez said.

Francis commissioned the report on McCarrick's history of abuse in October 2018 after credible abuse allegations against McCarrick surfaced earlier that year. McCarrick, 90, has repeatedly denied he ever abused anyone. He was last known to be living at a Capuchin Franciscan friary in Victoria, Kansas, but in January moved to an undisclosed location.

Bishops in the U.S. and others in the church had urged the Vatican to investigate the McCarrick case after a former papal ambassador levied charges of churchwide cover-up, most of which have since been discredited.

As the day continued, more U.S. bishops commented on the report, mostly acknowledging they were reviewing it and offering prayers and apologies to

survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

Cardinal-designate Wilton Gregory, who now heads the Washington Archdiocese that McCarrick led from 2000 to 2006, called the report on his predecessor "an important, difficult and necessary document" that "demands prayerful, thorough and thoughtful reflection."

"Though I am only now receiving this document, as you are, and have not had an opportunity to review it carefully, by virtue of the simple fact that this investigation had to be conducted and this report had to be written, my heart hurts for all who will be shocked, saddened, scandalized and angered by the revelations contained therein," said Gregory, who served as president of the U.S. bishops' conference at the height of the church's clergy abuse scandal. "Nonetheless, we know that if true redemptive healing is ever to commence — for those who have been harmed and for the Church Herself — this disclosure must be made."



Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick lays hands on Bishop James Checchio during his episcopal ordination and installation as bishop of Metuchen, New Jersey, in 2016. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

In a lengthy statement, Bishop James Checchio of Metuchen, New Jersey, where McCarrick first headed a diocese (1981-86), said to abuse survivors and their

families "I am deeply and wholly sorry."

"This report will, undoubtedly, cause sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger, disgust and pain — you are right to have these feelings," he said.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, where McCarrick was auxiliary bishop from 1977 to 1981, said in a statement the report is "a necessary step in helping us to understand the case of Theodore McCarrick." Dolan said abuse survivors deserve credit for bringing forward allegations in 2018 to the archdioceses of New York, Washington and Newark, New Jersey, and to Francis for his handling of the matter, including allowing local law officials to examine the charges.

"That the Holy See followed through on its assurance that, at the request of the American bishops, a complete study of the dismal case of Theodore McCarrick would be undertaken and published is also most encouraging," Dolan said. The New York archbishop added he would discuss the report on his radio show on Sirius XM's The Catholic Channel at 2 p.m. Eastern with Fr. Dave Dwyer and John Paul II biographer George Weigel.

Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich called the report "unprecedented and a watershed moment," and urged people to read the report in full.

"It pulls back the curtain on a culture of clericalism that has separated the clergy from the people they have been ordained to serve. While the report makes for painful reading, it is fearless in admitting the failures of church leaders," Cupich said.

'The Catholic sex abuse crisis is not over'

Catholics at U.S. universities and in the media also weighed in on the report.

John Garvey, president of the Catholic University of America, alerted the school community about the report in an email and pointed to resources from the university's Catholic Project. McCarrick was a student at Catholic University from 1958 to 1965, and he held roles as assistant chaplain, dean of students and director of development, and was one of its longest-serving trustees.

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Stephen White, executive director of the Catholic Project, which was launched a month after accusations against McCarrick were made public, said the harm caused by McCarrick cannot be undone by a single report. "But truth and transparency are necessary steps toward healing those wounds and repairing the trust that has been broken."

The EWTN-owned Catholic News Agency focused its initial reporting on the revelation that four New Jersey bishops provided inaccurate information to the Vatican in 2000 after New York Cardinal John O'Connor shared in late 1999 allegations against McCarrick. The National Catholic Register, also an EWTN property, had not published its own news story on the McCarrick report as of midday, instead posting the report in its entirety and running the CNA report.

Elizabeth Bruenig, a columnist for The New York Times, wrote on Twitter that the report points to a need for increased lay oversight and investigations into the extent of ongoing sexual harassment in Catholic seminaries. More than anything, she said, the report highlights that "the Catholic sex abuse crisis is not over."

In an analysis for WherePerterIs.com, Austen Ivereigh homed in on what he described as "two jaw-dropping revelations" in the report. The first, that John Paul II made the decision to appoint McCarrick as Washington archbishop despite being aware of reports of sexual abuse. The second, that former papal nuncio to the U.S. Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò did not follow through on orders in 2012 to investigate a sexual misconduct allegation from the early 1990s brought by a priest in the Metuchen Diocese.

Two months after McCarrick was removed from ministry in June 2018, Viganò issued a manifesto alleging a systemic cover-up of the former cardinal's misdeeds. Much of the letter's content has been widely discredited. The Italian archbishop, who has been in hiding since releasing the letter, was previously accused of attempting to interfere with an investigation of then-St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt. Viganò has denied any wrongdoing.

"The difference between the two revelations," Ivereigh wrote, "is that the report offers a convincing explanation of the first: not justifying it, but providing context to understand how it could have happened. The disobedience and negligence of

Viganò, on the other hand, are left hanging, crying out for an explanation for which there appears to be none."

In a statement issued midday, Viganò attempted to defend himself and questioned the timing of the report's publication as well as its conclusions about him. He, too, said he would further analyze the report.

Steve Millies, director of the Bernardin Center at the Catholic Theological Union, said in a tweet that a review of the report on McCarrick, widely known for his fundraising abilities, points to a central component throughout the church's decadeslong abuse crisis: money.

"The corruption in the church isn't really power or abuse. It really is money. It always is money," he said.

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This story appears in the **The McCarrick report** feature series. View the full series.