Opinion



by NCR Staff

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With the release of the Vatican's report on former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, one figure was mentioned over and over again, St. John Paul II. The report made clear that the pope was told about allegations of sexual abuse by McCarrick and promoted him still. In our editorial, "US bishops, please suppress the cult of St. John Paul II," we say that "for abuse victims, their advocates and many others, John Paul's memory is no longer a blessing." Following are letters to the editor responding to our editorial. Guidelines to join the conversation are detailed below.

Anyone who followed the McCarrick report and Pope John Paul II's failure to take it seriously should not be surprised that the many sins of the church were swept under the rug.

A bigger tell should have been how Pope Benedict XVI fast tracked the process of getting John Paull declared a saint. I didn't find him a decent pope, let alone a saint.

Someday the arc of justice will bend toward and reveal the truth of this scandal. While welcoming it, we will also be left with heavy and very sad hearts.

(Fr.) EDWARD M. LESAGE

Amherst, Massachusetts

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Well, it's about time!

Your editorial is way overdue and a little late in jumping on a bandwagon you should have been riding years ago.



Pope John Paul II's elevation of Theodore McCarrick is only one of his unfortunate and misguided actions.

His use of papal-ish executive orders fashioned to look like infallibility-lite made his overly long reign quite troubling. Ordinary Catholics, which means all of us, had our hopes that Vatican II would usher in a more socially conscious, inclusive and

prayerful church dashed. John Paul's deliberate attempt to suppress the agenda of the council set the church back decades — many thinking people believe irrevocably.

If NCR is going to call for the suppression of the cult of John Paul II, go for the gold. I am disappointed to see your sudden courage coming from what looks like a kneejerk reaction to his mishandling of the McCarrick problem because it's the popular thing to do right now. There are many other justifications for suppression.

While I adored John XXIII, neither he nor John Paul should have been made saints so hastily. That move was truly "playing to the gallery," transparently political and it has backfired. The McCarrick case should not be used to trash the John Paul II cult, however long in coming. Use it to trash the system that enabled him.

(Fr.) EDWARD G. LAMBRO

Paterson, New Jersey

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I have subscribed to NCR for over 50 years. As in the editorial about Pope John Paul II, its editors have always dealt with the effects of clericalism and elitism by speaking truth to power or to the bishops. Cult is a strong word but an apt one based on my own experience in the Archdiocese of Denver for over 30 years, beginning with Archbishop J. Francis Stafford, now cardinal, in the 1980s and continued by those he has mentored.

In 2008, both a victim and I reported to the Denver chancery personnel the victim's abuse as an adolescent by a priest ordained for the Wichita diocese in 1966 and transferred to Denver in 1979. I had met in person with the alleged pedophile on two occasions. For over 12 years, I have communicated with the victim, who was wounded in Vietnam. As late as April 3, 2020, I have written to Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila as a result of a special report of Oct. 22, 2019. As noted in the report all "Fr. B." had to do was to deny the allegations (as did McCarrick, as noted in your editorial) and he was believed by the conduct response team of the Archdiocese of Denver, while the victim and I had no credibility. Aquila has ignored and never responded to my letter to date.

For me, this has shattered the local hierarchy's credibility as an institution and caused the victim to leave the church. Calamitous, callous decision making whether in national or church politics does have consequences. For me, this is very personal and has contributed to my own dark night of the soul.

LEE KASPARI

Ellensburg, Washington

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I disagree strongly with your editorial asking the bishops to suppress devotion to Pope John Paul II. Your editorial position, it seems to me, is a polarizing position, even at a time when we are especially called to more understanding and acceptance of "the other." The bishops shouldn't encourage it, but suppressing it, it seems to me, is unnecessary and, perhaps, harmful in its lack of understanding and forgiveness.

For the record, I have not been a John Paul II fan; I consider myself a 'social justice Catholic,' committed to Jesus' command to "love one another." But John Paul II did many good things, even though he made some very bad decisions with disastrous consequences. Devotion to him is for the good things he has done and inspired. So, who are we to judge his motivations or relationship with God? As Sr. Helen Prejean says, "No one is the worst thing they have ever done." Why do we try to "erase" those who have done lots of good and some wrongs?

Instead, we can acknowledge sinfulness and the church's and John Paul II's response to sexual abuse as a tragic systemic evil. But like systemic racism, it usually was not a choice to do evil but was largely a kind of unconsciousness of what we have grown to better understand. Better to see John Paul II as a deeply flawed person, who nonetheless, loved God deeply. We do not need to denigrate him by suppressing him.

MARY CURRY NARAYAN

Vienna, Virginia

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I applaud that you consider this situation from the perspective of survivors of abuse. Would that this had always been the attitude of the church. It's more so now than ever before, but we're on a long path and not close to the end. Your piece is excellent in this regard, but then jumps to a very wrong conclusion.

God certainly could have stopped the canonization process in any number of provident ways. However, it seems that by these two direct divine interventions he is confirming for us to consider St. John Paul II a model of holiness; but that holiness doesn't necessarily protect us from extreme manipulators, and that even saints can make very poor judgment calls — and still be saints. That's a hopeful message for all of us who've ever been duped, scammed, deceived, lied to and used, and in that situation have called some epically bad shots, all while striving to serve the Lord.

Just as it would be wrong to ask the bishops for the suppression of God's cult for having knowingly permitted Theodore McCarrick and Marcial Maciel Degollado to do what they did, so it is wrong to call for the suppression of the cult of St. John Paul II. Let's be clear: the real bad guys here are McCarrick and Maciel, not St. John Paull II.

(Fr.) DANIEL RAY, LC

Rye, New York

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I am once again scandalized and more than angry. Is there any way of unsainting Pope John Paul II? He should never have been canonized in the first place, but this latest revelation simply is a bridge too far.

A patriarchal hierarchy that spends so much time and energy focusing on sinful sexual behaviors of others, once again is shown to ignore the log in its own eye. No wonder so many young people are becoming "nones" and dropping out of the institutional church.

CLARICE PENINGER

Fort Worth, Texas

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Your editorial against St. John Paul II has elicited an outpouring of critical letters from your readers. However, in my view this editorial in gravely flawed in fact and meets the standard of calumny. Calumny is defined as "The making of false and defamatory statements about someone in order to damage their reputation." Jesuit Fr. John A. Hardon has stated in his Modern Catholic Dictionary, that calumny is "Injuring another person's good name by lying."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that a person is guilty of calumny if he/she, "by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them." The person or organization who partakes of calumny does not have to state an untruth about someone else — the promotor of the untruth merely has to place a doubt about that honesty and good name of another into the minds of other parties.

Is this therefore a serious journalistic issue with significant moral implications?

The catechism states that calumny is so serious that it can amount to a mortal sin if the lie told causes grave damage to the person in question.

Hence it is will be grievously wrong if NCR does not report that the Vatican report clearly stated that St. John Paul II was deceived regarding ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

JOHN WILKS

Baulkham Hills, Australia

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Thank you for your editorial about the tarnished legacy of St. John Paul II. You are right to urge U.S. bishops to both stop the cult of him in the U.S. and request the Vatican formally suppress John Paul's cult worldwide. We are paying the price for the unseemly rush to canonization after his death.

May I suggest a broader lesson to be learned? The church should formally refuse to consider any step toward sainthood for at least 50 years after a person's death. For public figures and members of the clergy — especially popes — the clock shouldn't even start until all their papers have been made public and we've had decades to

thoughtfully consider a person's legacy in full.

Besides, what's the hurry? The church does not lack for saints.

MICHAEL GILTZ

Birmingham, Alabama

Advertisement

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Shame on you, shame on your editorial staff.

Pope St. John Paul II an admirable man? His Holiness was so much more than that, he gave the world hope, he gave the people of the world belief, he gave citizens of the world faith.

There is one person to blame for the actions of Theodore McCarrick, and that is himself.

I don't profess to know everything about this situation, and I also don't profess to know about being the pope — the daily struggles, the weight of responsibilities, the burden of duty in leading over 1 billion Catholics. What I do know is my faith and I feel that in writing this editorial, the staff at NCR may have strayed from theirs.

Today we think of John Paul II as just that, a saint. What we tend to forget is that although canonized, Karol Jozef Wojtyla was human and possessed all of the human frailties the rest of us have.

Catholics venerate saints and look to them as examples of lives well lived in the faith, not as gods that have done no wrong, they are ordinary people who have extraordinarily practiced the faith.

Instead of tearing down, consider building. Demonstrate the good the Holy Father has done, not as a eulogy to the man, but as a testament to what the ordinary man can strive toward in their lives.

JIM SMITH

Holly Springs, Mississippi

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Amen to your editorial requesting the suppression of the cult of John Paul II.

The rush to his official sainthood did not allow time-and-tide its role in establishing historical perspective.

(Deacon) JOHN DE LA GARZA

Buchanan Dam, Texas

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In your editorial, you encourage Catholics to support the suppression of the Pope John Paul II cult. Every Catholic should wholeheartedly support and encourage this otherwise it won't go away. It will get worse. How so? Those with a vested interest in maintaining the saintliness of John Paul will use legal and illegal means to continue their charade. There's too much money and prestige at stake to do otherwise. The making of saints is a money cow for the church.

The head of the Polish bishops' conference, Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki, said John Paul II had been "cynically deceived." He "formally asked the Vatican last year to elevate John Paul to the church's greatest honor, naming him a 'doctor of the church' and patron saint of Europe." While his request was rebuffed, it's not a dead issue for the Polish church.

If John Paul II's pontificate is not decisively handled now, it is inevitable, over time, an attempt will be made to rehabilitate his name, rekindling a fervent following. This is almost assured because the Polish church is a state Church under duress because of its many crimes and abuses. We know the church will use all means available to survive. Recasting John Paul II as a saint to be revered will serve that purpose.

MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

Tyler, Texas

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The church canonized John Paul II, a man who knowingly defended more than one guilty colleague against charges of sexual abuse! Can a "saint" be un-made? What an embarrassing mess!

THERESA STEPHANY

San Diego, California

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I have never been comfortable with the canonization of John Paul II. In addition to his failures on clerical sexual abuse, we must also note, among his other grave errors, the disastrous effect of his pontificate on the church in Latin America, including his promotion of such sinister figures as Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo.

However, I reject your calumnious claim that John Paul "willfully put at risk children and young adults." Your use of the word "willfully" implies that John Paul believed that he was putting people at risk. In fact, you offer no evidence at all that John Paul "willfully" put people at risk of sexual abuse. One may describe John Paul's as gullible, foolish, or delusional for placing his trust in figures such as Theodore McCarrick and Marcial Maciel Degollado, but trust them he did. He did not believe they would harm anyone, and therefore he was not "willfully" risking anyone's safety.

I must also note that your request to the U.S. bishops' conference that they "suppress the cult of St. John Paul II" is a direct challenge to the papal magisterium of Pope Francis, who canonized John Paul. Like "Catholic progress in extremis," it is an example of progressive sectarianism, which is no less deleterious to the church than the regressive sectarianism of Cardinal Raymond Burke and his ilk.

JEFFREY JONES

Hamburg, New York

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Your editorial would have never had to see print if there was not such a hasty, thoughtless, uncritical rush to make this man a saint long before the dust settled on his papacy.

We should also not forget that this premature canonization was a deep insult and offense to LGBTQI Catholics and their families, given John Paul's endorsement of then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's 1986 letter on the pastoral care of homosexual persons, which was anything but pastoral in it messaging. That letter's content found its way into the Catechism of the Catholic Church and its condemnation of LGBT persons as "objectively disordered."

To this day, these two words have caused immeasurable oppression and suffering and are still dragged out whenever there is an urge to demonize and marginalize LGBTQI persons. This includes firing them from their positions in Catholic institutions, leaving them without employment and income, and opening deep wounds in the institutions and communities that cherished their witness and work. This is not past history. The Supreme Court heard arguments this fall that would permit religiously affiliated institutions that accept taxpayer funding to prohibit LGBTQI persons and couples from legally adopting children. This scandalous and heartless legacy is not one of a saint.

JON SCHUM

West Roxbury, Massachusetts

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This story appears in the **The McCarrick report** and **Your thoughts** feature series.