News



Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington faces the press in the shadow of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 24, 2002. U.S. cardinals were meeting for a summit with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican, as the sex abuse crisis unfolded in the United States. (CNS/Reuters/Paolo Cocco)



by Peter Feuerherd

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

July 9, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

It was a story that got away from the National Catholic Reporter.

NCR tried and was unable to confirm the long-rumored abuse allegations against Theodore McCarrick, then a cardinal and archbishop of Washington, D.C., before they became national news.

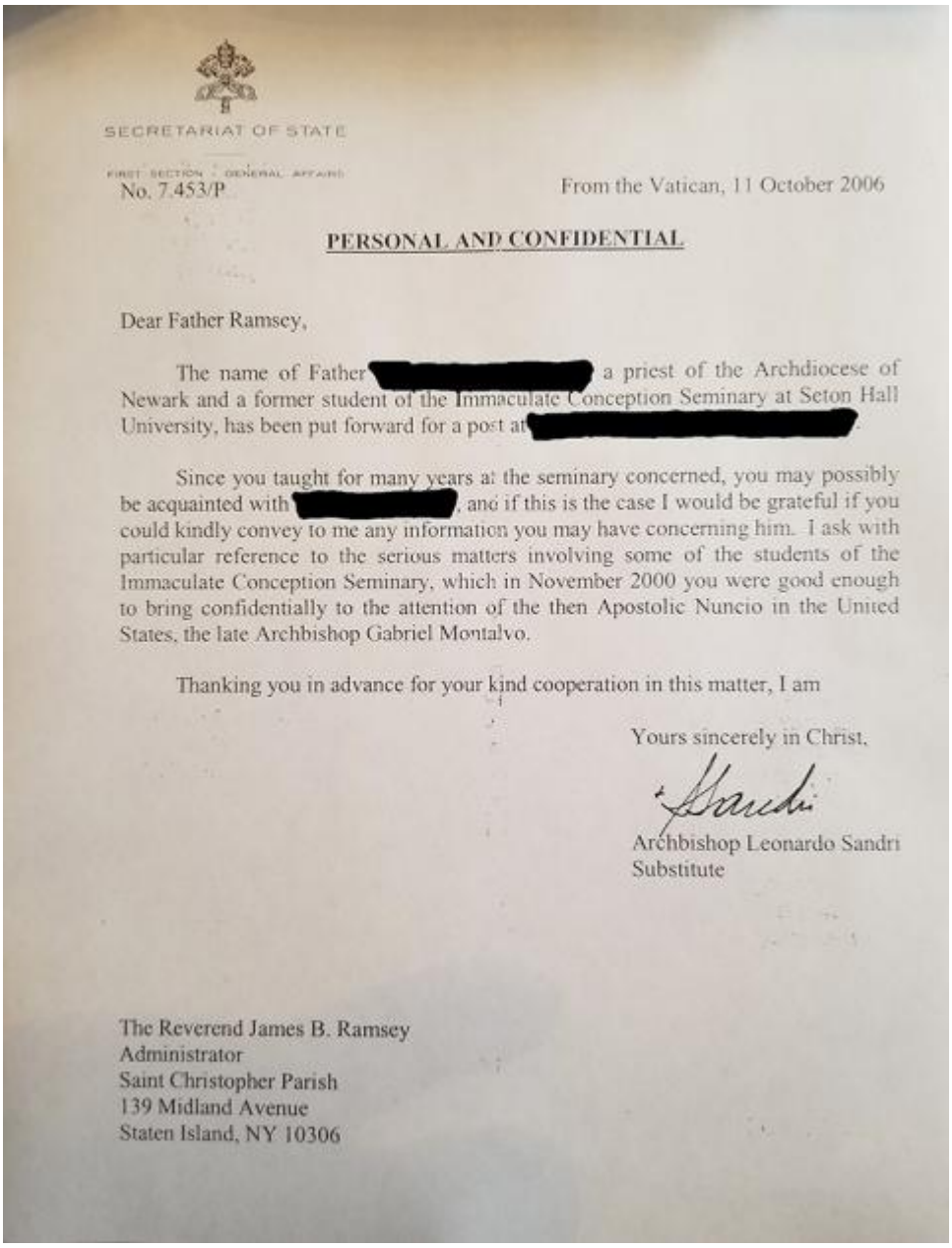
One of the reporters who investigated was my late brother, Joe Feuerherd, former editor and publisher of National Catholic Reporter.

This is the story behind that story.

McCarrick died at age 94 in April, and, upon his death, many replayed the horrors he perpetrated. This summer marks the seventh anniversary of the exposure of those crimes and cover-up.

Besides the victims who tried to warn the world — and those who tried to investigate it — there were those who suffered decades in silence. And there were few heroes in the sorry saga.

One hero to consider is Fr. Boniface Ramsey, a former seminary professor now serving as a parish priest in Queens, New York. Ramsey told me that as far back as the 1980s, he raised alarms, beginning with a seminary rector, and later with other ranking officials in the church — those in a position to do something about McCarrick. Ramsey said he was rebuffed.



SECRETARIAT OF STATE

FIRST SECTION - GENERAL AFFAIRS

No. 7.453/P

From the Vatican, 11 October 2006

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Father Ramsey,

The name of Father [redacted] a priest of the Archdiocese of Newark and a former student of the Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University, has been put forward for a post at [redacted].

Since you taught for many years at the seminary concerned, you may possibly be acquainted with [redacted], and if this is the case I would be grateful if you could kindly convey to me any information you may have concerning him. I ask with particular reference to the serious matters involving some of the students of the Immaculate Conception Seminary, which in November 2000 you were good enough to bring confidentially to the attention of the then Apostolic Nuncio in the United States, the late Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo.

Thanking you in advance for your kind cooperation in this matter, I am

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop Leonardo Sandri
Substitute

The Reverend James B. Ramsey
Administrator
Saint Christopher Parish
139 Midland Avenue
Staten Island, NY 10306

A letter dated Oct. 11, 2006, from Archbishop Leonardo Sandri at the Vatican to Fr. Boniface Ramsey, references a November 2000 letter Ramsey had written to the Vatican nuncio to the United States, warning about sexual abuse committed by Archbishop Theodore McCarrick. (CNS/Courtesy of Boniface Ramsey)

After McCarrick's death, Ramsey wrote to me a statement recognizing the pain felt by many triggered by memories of the former cardinal.

"For those whom he victimized and hurt, those memories will probably — understandably — be filled with rage, especially because, although he was punished by the Church as much as the Church was capable of punishing someone, he was never punished by civil law, and he never acknowledged the hurt that he caused," Ramsey wrote.

McCarrick's crimes, particularly his abuse of children, were made public in 2018. A New York Archdiocese investigation announced in June of that year noted credible allegations from a man abused by McCarrick when he was a child. That investigation broke the logjam. Other men came forth with similar stories of abuse. The New York Times followed up with a story detailing McCarrick's sexual harassment of seminarians.

In the Times article, Fr. Hans Zollner, then an adviser to the pope on protecting minors, credited the #MeToo movement with creating momentum around the issue of sexual harassment directed at adults. The news of the archdiocese's investigation also encouraged others to come forward, including Robert Ciolek, a New Jersey attorney and former Newark seminarian.

Sharon Otterman, co-author of The New York Times article that broke the story, said the timing was right.

"Ciolek wasn't that hard to track down — his name had been floating around as someone to speak with among advocates for people sexually abused by clergy," Otterman said. "What was different was that he was finally willing to speak, breaking open this story."



Former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick arrives at Dedham District Court in Dedham, Mass., Sept. 3, 2021, after being charged with molesting a 16-year-old boy during a 1974 wedding reception. The charges were dismissed in 2023 due to McCarrick's cognitive decline. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

The news about McCarrick's crimes against children were new to me, but I had heard about McCarrick's regular harassment of seminarians at a beach house. I was surprised by the expressions of surprise, assuming that my knowledge was shared by others attuned to church intrigue.

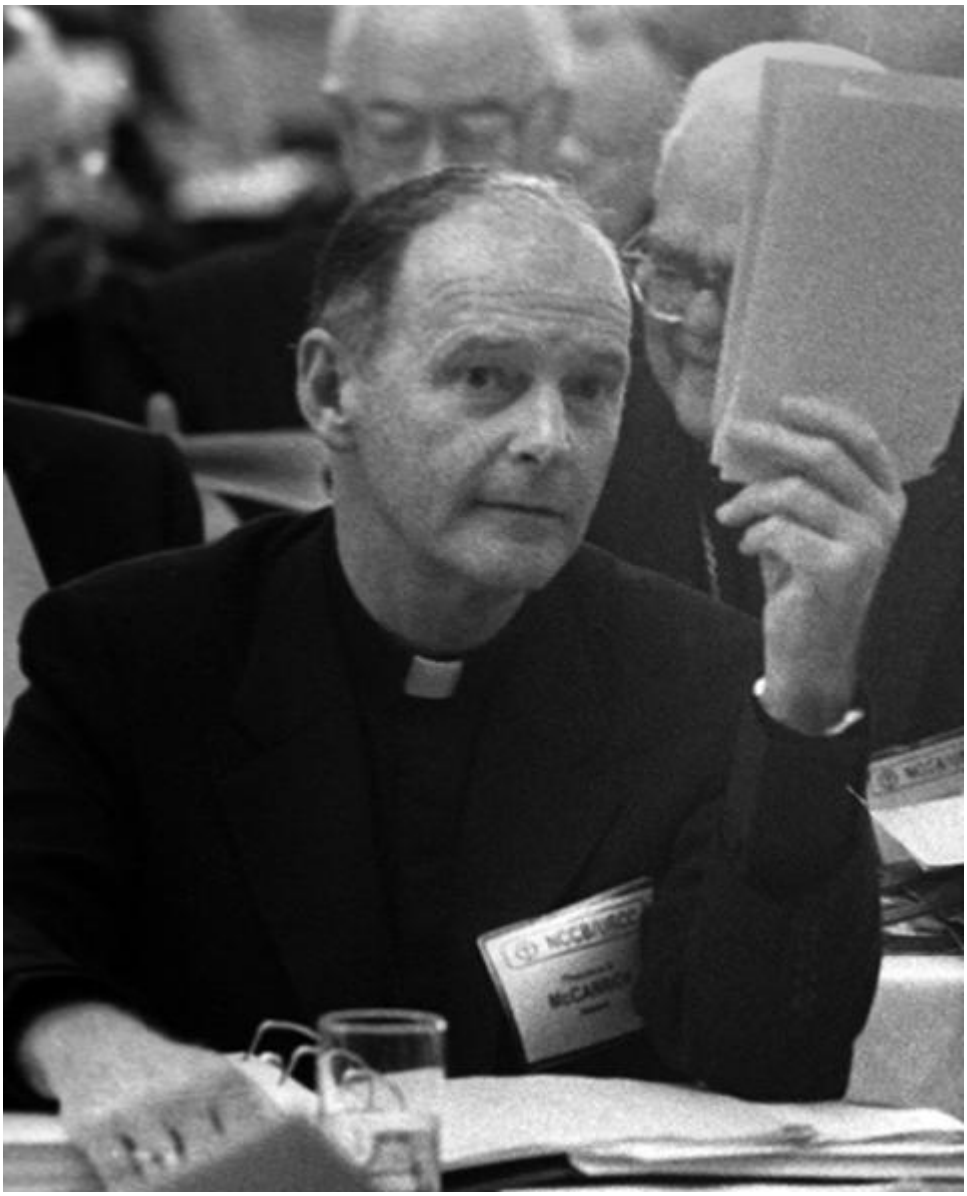
My source was Ramsey, in a roundabout way.

In the 2000s, my brother Joe was an investigative reporter for NCR. He and I would occasionally talk shop. He told me after writing about McCarrick that he heard from Ramsey and that the priest was upset at the laudatory tone for a serial harasser.

Ramsey wrote to Joe about the now-familiar story of McCarrick taking seminarians with him on weekend retreats where the number of participants regularly exceeded

the available beds, a contrivance taken advantage of by the then-archbishop.

Joe was intrigued. He made phone calls, tried to get someone to confirm Ramsey's account, but came up empty. Later, we would learn that Joe was among a number of reporters pursuing a story thwarted by a wall of silence.



Theodore McCarrick, then archbishop of Newark, N.J., casts a vote during the U.S. bishops' fall meeting in 1986. (CNS file)

Ramsey stood seemingly alone for decades. He said he earned the wrath of McCarrick and was pushed off a formation council for the seminary after voting to expel one of McCarrick's favorite yet unqualified seminarians. Ramsey, at the time a

Dominican, eventually landed as a priest in the New York Archdiocese and pastored a Manhattan parish.

Through it all, Ramsey would tell his tale about the beach house, something he picked up as common knowledge around Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University. He talked to the seminary rector in the late 1980s. He talked to bishops and archbishops, including one who confided that bishops knew of McCarrick's proclivities but were unable or unwilling to do much about them.

After Pope Benedict XVI told McCarrick to maintain a private profile, Ramsey would communicate with bishops whenever that edict was violated, he said, such as when McCarrick participated in the 2015 funeral for New York Cardinal Edward Egan.

In his later years, McCarrick was frequently seen as an exiled sick old man, wracked by mental failures and physical frailties. But the context needs to include what he was like at his height. He was erudite, smooth, and a natural diplomat, praised for promoting church peacekeeping efforts around the world. At a time when his fellow American bishops were largely turned inward, McCarrick was seen as an exception, ready to engage the world with Catholic social teaching.

He was a regular on "Meet the Press" and consulted with senators and presidents. When Ted Kennedy died, it was McCarrick who led the mourning, attended by the Washington liberal establishment.



Cardinal Theodore McCarrick addresses Kennedy family members during the burial service for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va., Aug. 29, 2009. (CNS/Reuters/Jim Young)

In 2010, McCarrick represented the U.S. bishops at the Mass marking the 30th anniversary of the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero, held at the cathedral in San Salvador, El Salvador. I was there, hearing McCarrick preach, his fluent Spanish linking U.S. Catholics to those struggling in Central America.

Even though there was a cloud hanging over him, it was never evident. At the time, I chalked up the story about the Newark seminarians as typical of suspicion cast upon church leaders who earned the wrath of ideological enemies, used to settle ecclesial scores.

After the story broke, confirming Ramsey's account, I interviewed a former priest from Newark for NCR who told me that the beach house harassment was common knowledge among seminarians. Sometimes it was part of a shared gallows humor joke, at other times a reason for seminarians to come up with all kinds of tortured excuses to avoid the weekend excursions.

A Vatican report issued in 2020 told the story. The report examined scores of testimonies. Some church leaders came out looking good: New York Cardinal John O'Connor, for one, regularly implored Vatican higher-ups to stop McCarrick's career ascendancy. Just about all the church leaders cited in the report for ignoring McCarrick's behavior were dead. Most of those still alive said they didn't know anything.

At the time, I thought that the sorry episode could unite the church behind the banner of opposition to sex abuse and cover-up. That was not to be. Traditionalists lambasted progressive bishops for enabling McCarrick, arguing that the church had fallen into moral laxity. Progressives put the blame on Pope John Paul II, who allowed McCarrick the prestigious post of archbishop of Washington even while Vatican officials were aware of McCarrick's crimes.

Advertisement

Seven years later, the blame shifting remains a dreary response. The McCarrick crimes and cover-up were not about our bishops versus their bishops. There was so much cover-up to go around, any kind of objective conclusion can only note that McCarrick was at his essence a powerful man adept at silencing those who might dare challenge him.

I don't agree with Rod Dreher on much but the longtime journalistic investigator of Catholic scandals is right on a point he made after McCarrick's death. Dreher emphasized that "the line between good and evil in the scandal" did not run between progressives and traditionalists within the church.

What made Ramsey credible is that he has no ideological ax to grind, other than a belief that McCarrick's behavior with seminarians was a scandal that threatened the sanctity of the priesthood. Ramsey now ministers past retirement age to the people at St. Rita Church in Long Island City, Queens, some who live in city projects and old row houses, surrounded by high-rise gleaming apartments signaling gentrification.

At 79, Ramsey knows that his obituary one day will not be about his service to the church as a seminary professor or parish priest, but to his long-term and frayed connection to McCarrick. Ramsey knows that while McCarrick has met his eternal judgment, his influence lives on. As the priest said in his note to me:

For the countless others who could hardly imagine that a man of God, never mind a cardinal, could do what he did, there is the memory of what was putatively a more innocent time that turned into a roaring disillusionment with the Church; their anger is directed against the bishops and men like them, who knew about McCarrick but said nothing, rather than against McCarrick himself, whom most of them never knew.

I am in neither camp; McCarrick didn't victimize me, despite his being aware of my distaste for him, and any illusions that I might have had about the Church have long since evaporated. When the news of what he did was made public, Theodore McCarrick's fall was steep, rapid and decisive, and all at once he became an object of universal scorn and disgust. I can think of no greater punishment for a human being than that. I pity Theodore McCarrick.

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.