

Former U.S. nuncio calls for pope's resignation

CNS photo

In a scathing 11-page written statement, the Vatican's former ambassador to the United States accuses Pope Francis of ignoring concerns about Archbishop Theodore McCarrick and lifting sanctions against the former cardinal years before the public became aware of abuse allegations against him.

Without offering any corroborating documentation, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò alleges that Pope Benedict XVI, sometime in 2009 or 2010, banned the former U.S. cardinal from publicly celebrating Mass, living in a seminary or traveling to give lectures, and ordered him to a life of prayer and penance.

Archbishop Viganò, 77, a vocal critic of Pope Francis and a controversial figure in Vatican politics, said he learned about those sanctions from the former prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and that he personally informed Pope Francis about them in June 2013. He said the pope failed to act.

He said he knew

"He knew from at least June 23, 2013, that McCarrick was a serial predator," writes Archbishop Viganò, who also called on Pope Francis to "set a good example" and resign along with the cardinals and bishops who the archbishop said covered up Archbishop McCarrick's alleged abuse.

In a statement emailed to Our Sunday Visitor, Washington D.C. attorney Barry Coburn, who represents Archbishop McCarrick, declined to directly address the allegations raised in Archbishop Viganò's letter.

“These are serious allegations,” Coburn said. “Archbishop McCarrick, like any other person, has a right to due process. He looks forward to invoking that right at the appropriate time.”

Archbishop Viganò’s letter, which was first reported Saturday, was released while Pope Francis visited Ireland, which has also been rocked with its own abuse crisis. On Saturday, the pope addressed the crisis during a Mass at Phoenix Park in Dublin.

“Some members of the hierarchy didn’t own up to these painful situations and kept silence. We ask for forgiveness,” Pope Francis said.

Speaking aboard the papal plane from Dublin to Rome on Aug. 26, Pope Francis declined to address the former nuncio’s claims. The pontiff said people can make up their own minds about the statement.

“I read the statement this morning, and I must tell you sincerely that, I must say this, to you and all those who are interested: Read the statement carefully and make your own judgment,” Pope Francis said, adding that the statement “speaks for itself.”

A difficult time

In the United States, the archbishop’s statement provided another flashpoint in the clergy abuse scandals that have engulfed the American Catholic community since revelations came to light that Archbishop McCarrick, the former cardinal-archbishop of Washington D.C., is alleged to have sexually abused seminarians and minors.

The statement also created new scrutiny for Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the current archbishop of Washington D.C., who is already dealing with the fallout from the Pennsylvania grand jury report this month that raised questions regarding how he

handled clergy sex abuse cases during his tenure as bishop of Pittsburgh.

In his statement, Archbishop Viganò said he mentioned the reported sanctions against former Archbishop McCarrick to Cardinal Wuerl, and that based on the cardinal's response, "it was immediately clear to me that he was fully aware of it."

Chieko Noguchi, a spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Washington D.C., provided a statement to OSV disputing the archbishop's claims.

"In spite of what Archbishop Viganò's memo indicates, Cardinal Wuerl did not receive any documentation or information during his time in Washington regarding any actions taken against Archbishop McCarrick," Noguchi said.

The claims made in the 7,000-word statement – which Archbishop Viganò called his "testimony" – angered many longtime critics of Pope Francis, some of whom took to social media over the weekend to demand accountability and the pope's resignation. The pope's defenders cast doubts on the statement and cited a 2014 memo that Archbishop Viganò wrote in an effort to suppress a Church investigation into alleged sexual misconduct by former Minnesota Archbishop John Nienstedt.

Terry McKiernan from BishopAccountability.org, a nonprofit organization that tracks clergy sex abuse cases in the United States, told Our Sunday Visitor that while he believes Archbishop Vagano has "an axe to grind," he added that there still should be a thorough investigation into what the pope and bishops knew about former Cardinal McCarrick, and when they knew it.

"I hope this puts additional pressure on Pope Francis to be more aggressive on the issue," McKiernan said.

Question of sanctions

Archbishop Viganò, who served as the Papal Nuncio to the United States from October 2011 to April 2016, writes in his statement that his predecessors in the Vatican's embassy in Washington D.C., knew about and reported Archbishop McCarrick's alleged abuse to successive Vatican secretaries of state, and that they did nothing.

In 2006 and 2008, while assigned to the Vatican Secretariat of State, Archbishop Viganò said he wrote memos concerning the alleged abuse, and that he learned of the reported sanctions around the time that he was transferred to the Governorate of Vatican City State.

Archbishop Viganò said he discussed the sanctions in a 2011 meeting with then-Cardinal McCarrick, and that the cardinal, "muttering in a barely comprehensible way, admitted that he had perhaps made the mistake of sleeping in the same bed with some seminarians at his beach house, but he said this as if it had no importance."

Some observers note that then-Cardinal McCarrick, during the timeframe when Archbishop Viganò said the sanctions were in effect, several times publicly celebrated Mass, including at St. Peter's Basilica. Still other observers have pointed out that then-Cardinal McCarrick may simply have ignored whatever sanctions may have been placed upon him. Reporters, both Catholic and secular, continue to seek clarity.

Donna Doucette, the executive director of Voice of the Faithful, an advocacy group for clergy sex abuse victims, told OSV that Pope Francis, while not perfect and having made mistakes on the issue, has taken positive steps over the years to remove bishops who abused minors or failed to hold their priests accountable for abuse.

"Any bishop who covered up sex abuse should resign, and the

pope should accept their resignation,” Doucette said. “That said, if Pope Francis was one of those bishops who actively covered up credible accounts of clergy sex abuse, we would apply the same standard.”

On Sunday, Archbishop Viganò told CBS News that he had no agenda and was just stating facts to “to combat the grave situation in the Church, to protect the Church and also to stop future abuse.”

Ideological lines

Archbishop Viganò has been a lightning rod in Vatican politics. In 2012, some of the archbishop’s letters were published in the “Vatileaks” scandal. In those letters, he asked not to be transferred to the Washington embassy, and he claimed he was being punished for exposing corruption in the Church.

In 2016, Pope Francis replaced Archbishop Viganò, who had reached retirement age, as nuncio to the United States. Archbishop Viganò’s role in arranging for the pope to meet Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, drew criticism in the wake of the 2015 U.S. visit during which the face-to-face meeting occurred.

In his letter, Archbishop Viganò also wades into ideological battles roiling the Church in the United States. He singles out several bishops who were appointed by or are close to Pope Francis, questioning their sincerity and commitment to rooting out sex abuse. And in a time when the role of homosexuality in the clergy sex-abuse scandals is being hotly debated, the archbishop accuses some prelates who are close to the pope of belonging to a “homosexual current in favor of subverting Catholic doctrine on homosexuality.”

McKiernan, of BishopAccountability.org, called Archbishop

Viganò's long statement "a uniquely comprehensive salvo in the Catholic culture wars." He added that clergy sex abuse cuts across ideological lines.

"Both liberal and orthodox bishops have covered up the abuse crisis, just as both liberal and orthodox priests have abused children, often using their respective ideologies as cover and even as tools of seduction," McKiernan said.

Brian Fraga is an Our Sunday Visitor contributing editor.