

Editorial: questions

Unanswered

When the Vatican announced on Feb. 16 that Theodore McCarrick, the disgraced former cardinal-archbishop of Washington, D.C., had been dismissed from the clerical state, the only surprise was that it took so long. ([See story by Brian Fraga here](#)) The first public revelation of McCarrick's "delicts" (canonical crimes) occurred in June of last year, eight months before the verdict was made public. Over the next several months, details about the delicts of which he was convicted in February – "solicitation in the Sacrament of Confession, and sins against the Sixth Commandment with minors and with adults" – came to light.

This editorial board had hoped that the lengthy process was a sign that the Vatican was heeding the call that we and many other Catholic laypeople had made last summer and fall to look beyond the mere facts of McCarrick's crimes and investigate the circumstances that had allowed him to commit them with impunity for nearly 50 years.

Those circumstances include elements of the structure of authority in the hierarchy of the Church, where each bishop technically is accountable only to the pope himself. Those circumstances include the culture of sexual license in the United States, and the Western world in general, that made McCarrick's behavior seem not uncommon, and on some level "acceptable" so long as it was "consensual" – or even just that it was with adults. (The beginning of the end for McCarrick was the revelation that he had abused a minor, not the decades-old persistent rumors of inappropriate relationships with priests and adult seminarians.)

And finally, those circumstances include the culture of secrecy of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States over

the past 50 or more years – the same culture that enabled the decades-long cover-up of clerical sexual abuse.

By announcing McCarrick's punishment without also revealing what, if anything, the investigation and trial had uncovered concerning these broader issues, the Vatican missed a huge opportunity. McCarrick's crimes are particularly egregious, but the laity have come to realize that they aren't isolated, and that far too many bishops in the United States and abroad (including in the Vatican) were aware of them for many years and did nothing to bring McCarrick to justice. This is especially disturbing given the prominent role McCarrick played in the development of the U.S. bishops' response, back in 2002, to the abuse crisis. Even more important than "What did they know, and when did they know it?" is the question of "Why does it seem that nothing was done?" Exposing the circumstances that allowed McCarrick to act as he did for so many years would have sent a strong signal that the Vatican is truly serious about preventing such abuses, and the scandals that follow them, from ever occurring again.

As the Vatican's summit of the heads of bishops' conferences worldwide approached, there was concern among some Catholic laity in the United States that it, too, would fail to consider the circumstances surrounding the McCarrick affair. At a press conference announcing the summit's theme, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, a close adviser to Pope Francis and one of the presenters, was asked whether it would address issues arising from the McCarrick case – particularly the abuse of adult seminarians. He replied that it would not. Instead, the summit's focus would be on minors who "don't have a voice."

"Misbehavior on the part of clerics with vulnerable adults or other adults," Cardinal Cupich did acknowledge, "are topics that need addressing." We look forward to that day.

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