

# Analysis: What does the McCarrick report tell us?

For two years, the investigation and report concerning former cardinal and sexual predator Theodore E. McCarrick was an object of speculation and anticipation. Now it is here. And while [the 450-page document](#) answers some questions, it can't help but spark others.

The much-anticipated report was released by the Holy See on Nov. 10, after being ordered by Pope Francis and assembled under the direction of the Holy See's Secretariat of State. It would have been almost impossible to fulfill the expectations placed on this document [since its October 2018 authorization](#), but that does not negate the historic and groundbreaking attempt at transparency provided within its pages. This so-called "McCarrick report" is the first document publicly released by the Church that goes to such lengths to investigate the actions of one individual within Church hierarchy, and, as such, it has the potential to serve as a model for future ecclesiastical transparency – if we can discern where it both succeeds and fails.

## Inside the report

The details of the report, taken from "all relevant documents after a diligent search" and more than 90 interviews [ranging from laypersons to Pope Francis](#) to McCarrick himself, construct a clearer portrait of McCarrick, who did much good – and who wasn't shy about letting officials in Rome, especially those at the top, know it. Moreso, though, the 90-year-old former archbishop of Washington is portrayed as an individual seemingly motivated primarily by a desire for attention and affection. A gladhander and ambitious workaholic, McCarrick yearned for recognition and relevancy. And he was as duplicitous as he could be charming, never hesitating to

endear himself to those who might be able to extend his influence by being referred to as a “dear” or “special” friend.

The report reads as part investigatory and part revelatory. In the former portions, the document includes and endorses the basic narrative of McCarrick’s background and actions, much of which had been previously reported by major American news outlets, though copious details add plenty of sickening color. In the latter portion, the report reveals publicly – perhaps a first from an official Holy See document – the potential for ugly internal workings of the hierarchy, even at the highest levels.

The evidence presented within the report reveals an ecclesial culture that was often misguided and even corrupt. One more concerned with public scandal than the veracity of the shocking allegations or potential damage to victims. Nearly 20 years after the clergy sexual abuse crisis came to light, it is sadly a familiar story. This clericalist culture enabled McCarrick to thrive, and the report chronicles portions of the man’s ecclesiastical career in which he skillfully worked the system to his advantage. Indeed, the system itself made his game, and its success, possible.

## **What McCarrick did**

The report identifies what the Holy See had known in the past about McCarrick’s own propensity for misconduct. It chronicles the great deal of ink spilled in the United States and in Rome about McCarrick’s then-alleged predation, particularly in the 1990s, as he was considered for promotions. Despite this, a thorough investigation into the claims of adult misconduct, particularly toward seminarians, never took place. The report makes clear that adult victims who came forward essentially were not taken seriously – or worse. One of McCarrick’s alleged victims, himself a priest, related part of a conversation that took place during a forced counseling

session (where the Jesuit priest-therapist tried to assault him): “‘Don’t think you are going to get anywhere with a complaint against your bishop because it will be useless.’ It was not like an open threat. It was a way of saying: ‘You are powerless; you won’t be believed.’” The report also identifies there was an anonymous letter from a mother alleging pedophilic tendencies that was never investigated.

The fact that allegations against McCarrick had been repeated through the years, even often discussed by curial officials, and yet were not taken seriously, suggests that such allegations might have been more commonplace than we would prefer to think. It is revealing and disturbing that one of McCarrick’s priest-victims, quoted in the report, said the predator “tried to convince me that priests engaging in sexual activity with each other was normal and accepted in the United States, and particularly in that diocese.”

Since the McCarrick scandal broke in 2018, it has emerged that the allegations against McCarrick, at least regarding his misconduct with adults, were some of the worst kept ecclesiastical secrets in recent decades. But [they were never formally investigated](#) until a charge of abuse of a minor surfaced in 2017. And some who saw suspicious behavior looked the other way, such as when the report states that some clergy who lived with McCarrick turned a blind eye or explained away that he had adult men sharing his room at night. Archbishop William E. Lori, now of Baltimore and a former Washington auxiliary, for example, was quoted in the report as having heard rumors about McCarrick, but the report says the archbishop “did not give ‘them a lot of mind’ because there were ‘a lot of other rumors about ... other people that just were not true’ and were often ‘started out of jealousy, or a desire to malign.’”

## Involvement of popes

The report asserts that McCarrick's own denials of any misdeeds and vehement expressions of innocence, even in personal communications to Pope John Paul II, helped confirm a narrative that painted him as a victim of anonymous attacks by unidentified enemies. This narrative fit with John Paul II's own experience in communist Poland, where he had lived for most of his life, and where clergy were blackmailed and became the victims of falsehoods and baseless scandals in order to destroy the Church's credibility.

The report reveals that John Paul, in addition to not moving McCarrick to New York in 2000, pulled the plug on appointing McCarrick to Chicago after the death of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1996. Cardinal Bernardin had been the subject of an abuse allegation – subsequently dropped – by a former seminarian a few years before he died, and the report indicates that Rome was looking for someone without scandal to replace him.

But despite these setbacks for McCarrick, and even though John Paul was warned by former New York archbishop Cardinal John O'Connor before the latter's death in 2000 that McCarrick should not be promoted to higher office for fear of public scandal, John Paul took McCarrick at his word. He also believed the word of three now-deceased New Jersey bishops who effectively lied about what they knew regarding McCarrick's predations. With that background, the pope chose to appoint McCarrick as archbishop of Washington in 2000 – a promotion that was soon followed by a red hat. It remains unclear if more incriminating information regarding McCarrick was withheld from John Paul.

One of the driving forces behind the compilation and release of the McCarrick report was a "testimony" released Aug. 22, 2018, by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, former nuncio to the United States, who said he had knowledge of "canonical

sanctions" leveled against McCarrick by retired Pope Benedict XVI. While such sanctions were not as formal as Archbishop Vigano claimed, the report confirms that Pope Benedict XVI had approved an informal, private plan to keep McCarrick from the public eye. The fear of public scandal should any media gain interest in the allegations of misconduct against McCarrick – particularly in the wake of settlements that were reached around the time of his retirement – was real. Though appearing in writing to be submissive to Pope Benedict's request, McCarrick was two-faced, and in practice followed it very little. Instead of living quietly and out of the public eye, McCarrick continued his globetrotting and meddling in international diplomacy. This busyness was flaunted in the face of Holy See officials and even Benedict himself – evidence of McCarrick's own arrogance and peculiar confidence that no one would challenge him.

## **Gaps in the story**

These are just some of the highlights from the report, and, while they provide a good amount of information and insight into McCarrick's ascent, the faithful are left grappling with other questions of seeming systemic failure and corruption.

Perhaps it was beyond the report's scope, but no financial records appear to have been investigated. McCarrick's own financial dealings repeatedly have been called into question in the last few years and appear to be tied to his manipulation of an ecclesiastical system that protected and benefited him. This includes what the report refers to as "his customary gift-giving to Roman Curia and Nunciature officials," as well as many other claims made about his personal charity account in Washington. As a means to uncover more of the truth about McCarrick's reach and influence, one must, as they say, follow the money.

And what of McCarrick's reach and influence in appointments to the episcopacy? The document confirms that McCarrick over the

years exerted his voice regarding candidates for episcopal office and suggestions of who might fill vacancies in significant episcopal sees, as can be common for cardinals of the Church. A footnote, however, notes that uncovered "correspondence" from McCarrick regarding two appointments that have been said to be connected with his influence – namely the appointments of Cardinal Blase Cupich to Chicago and Cardinal Joseph Tobin to Newark – "never mentioned" and "never raised" the names of those individuals. But the report does not address the question of whether in person or telephone communication took place concerning those appointments.

If the report tries to lay blame on anybody, it is only deceased bishops, two former popes (one canonized), a former papal secretary (Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz) and Archbishop Vigano. No other living bishops are implicated by the report for covering for or not speaking up about McCarrick. This includes Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who, since the McCarrick story broke in 2018, has had a hard time publicly admitting what he knew and when he knew it. The retired archbishop of Washington and McCarrick's successor was given what appears to be an extraordinary opportunity to respond to any evidence contained within the report that may have put him in a bad light. When the McCarrick scandal first erupted, Cardinal Wuerl claimed he knew nothing about McCarrick's sexual predation. But the report reminds readers that the cardinal reported an allegation that he received against McCarrick in 2004 to the nuncio – a fact that he claimed he simply forgot in 2018. He was also almost certainly aware of the informal sanctions placed on McCarrick. A deeper investigation is warranted here.

Even more seriously, many questions remain about what Cardinal Kevin Farrell knew about McCarrick. Cardinal Farrell is now camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church and will exercise governance of the Holy See when the papacy is vacant. He also was recently appointed to chair a financial watchdog

commission for the Holy See. Although then-Bishop Farrell was McCarrick's vicar general, auxiliary bishop and housemate, testimony in the report by Susan Gibbs, McCarrick's former communications director, presents him as distant from McCarrick. However, the report also shows that McCarrick had told his Newark auxiliaries and priests' council about allegations that surfaced while he was archbishop there (an arrogant and duplicitous attempt to clear his name and garner support). Given this history, one is left wondering if McCarrick did the same with his staff and presbyteral council in Washington – and whether those individuals were interviewed for the report. A 2018 internal investigation in Washington, initiated by Cardinal Wuerl and referenced in the report, only states that there was no evidence that McCarrick committed abuse while archbishop of Washington. It says nothing about what rumors were heard by whom, or what McCarrick was saying to auxiliary bishops or priests, or what anyone may have heard about his past behavior.

Finally, according to the report, when it came to allegations of McCarrick's misconduct up through the time of his appointment to Washington in 2000, it seemed there was a lot of smoke but no smoking gun. But from what we see in the report, it should not have been hard to find it, if a thorough investigation had been launched. That accusations against McCarrick never went away – and even reached popes themselves – casts further doubt on the integrity and efficacy of allowing bishops to police other bishops when accusations are leveled against them. This is the current protocol that was reinforced by Pope Francis' 2019 *motu proprio, Vos estis lux mundi*.

Further examination of the details in this report, especially those within the footnotes and tangential information, by scholars and reporters in the months and years ahead hopefully will help bring about answers to these questions and more. Though this report is a helpful start, the Church still

deserves a complete accounting of McCarrick, his enablers and those he enabled.

The true worth of the McCarrick report may ultimately be found in what lessons the Church chooses – or doesn't choose – to take away from McCarrick's sordid saga. Based on what the report exposes, it is hard to imagine how the Church can fully and productively move forward without a transformational reform of clergy and ecclesiastical culture. Will Church leaders choose to learn such lessons, or will they choose to believe that McCarrick's case was an anomaly rather than a sign of something systemic?

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