

Suppressing the Cult of Pope John Paul II. The Cardinal McCarrick Affair

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As chief conductor of the saint factory, Pope John Paul II was always going to be, in time, canonised. Almost 500 saints were created under his watch. The previous 600 years had seen 300. But declaring him a saint in 2014, a mere nine years after his death, was speedy by the standards of the Vatican. Critics, and those more reserved about the wisdom of such a move, now have more reason to question the pontiff's hastily affixed halo.

In a 449-page [report](#) released last week by the Vatican, the large figure of ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick takes centre stage. McCarrick was promoted by John Paul in 2000 to be archbishop of Washington DC. He was defrocked by Pope Francis last year following a separate Vatican inquest which found McCarrick to have abused his power over seminarians and bore responsibility for sexually abusing children and adults, with some acts taking place during confession.

While Pope Francis is attempting to do some tidying up in the church, a deeper investigation was not necessarily what he had hoped for. Despite [being praised](#) for cleansing “the Church of its dirt”, McCarrick had impressed him. It took the savage promptings of the former Holy See ambassador to the US, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, to push the cart along. Viganò had been one of the noisiest of accusers, [claiming](#) that 20 or so US and Vatican officials, not to mention Pope Francis himself, had been responsible for the vigilant concealment of McCarrick's improprieties. The Report found some of the claims to have merit, others not.

Viganò himself was not spared; stinging suggestions were made of his own efforts to either conceal or frustrate processes of investigating McCarrick. One instance of this involved Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the newly appointed Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, urging Viganò to take steps investigating the claims of a certain “Priest 3” from Metuchen whose lawsuit alleged “that overt sexual conduct between him and McCarrick occurred in 1991.” He “did not take these steps and therefore never placed himself in a position to ascertain the credibility of Priest 3.”

The lengthier Report served to sketch John Paul's role in a sordid tale of institutional complicity, though it is rather forgiving at points. Reports about McCarrick's behaviour were already being received during the late 1990s. A letter dated October 28, 1999 from the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal John O'Connor, to the Apostolic Nuncio, was shared with the pope summarising various allegations against McCarrick. These included claims of sexual conduct, actual and attempted, with priests; “a series of anonymous letters” distributed to Church officials accusing McCarrick of paedophilia with his “nephews” and instances where beds were shared with young adult men and seminarians at the Bishop's residence in Metuchen and Newark and a beach house on the New Jersey shore.

John Paul did relent in commissioning an inquiry directed at four New Jersey bishops. While the bishops confirmed that McCarrick had shared a bed with young men, instances of “sexual misconduct,” according to the Report, were not confirmed. However, “three of the four American bishops provided inaccurate and incomplete information to the Holy See regarding McCarrick’s sexual conduct with young adults.” The information, in turn “appears likely to have impacted the conclusions of John Paul II’s advisors and, consequently, of John Paul II himself.”

A critical point seems to have been the personal intervention of McCarrick himself. On August 6, 2000, he penned a letter to the then papal secretary Bishop Stanisław Dziwisz, in an attempt to counter the allegations made by Cardinal O’Connor.

“In the seventy years of my life,” wrote a solemn McCarrick, “I have never had sexual relations with any person, male or female, young or old, cleric or lay, nor have I ever abused another person or treated them with disrespect.”

Presenting himself as a model of celibate propriety, his letter was believed. McCarrick’s name was not only put forward as a candidate for promotion but checks as to his adherence to Church doctrine were waived by Papal direction. Dziwisz [would himself](#) go on to be stone deaf, even hostile, to claims of abuse in the Church, notably after becoming Archbishop of Krakow in 2005.

The Report also notes the culture of the period, in part to exempt the Holy See from claims of connivance. There were no complaints “direct from a victim, whether adult or minor, about McCarrick’s misconduct.” His supporters, to that end, “could plausibly characterize the allegations against him and ‘gossip’ and ‘rumours’.” As is often the case in such institutional investigations, notably when made by the institution itself, a bit is had both ways.

The hoodwink defence is always easy to resort to when the larder of options is bare. Papal biographer George Weigel [is familiar](#) with the tried formula, fashioned from the greater the saint, greater the sinner school of persuasion. “Saints are human beings, and saints, in their humanity, can be deceived.” Given that the pontiff purports to be a representative hovering somewhere between the heavenly divine and earth bound humanity, this argument quickly collapses. But it certainly satisfied the head of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gadecki, who is of the view that John Paul [should be venerated](#) further, both as a Doctor of the Church and patron saint of Europe. (The Vatican disagrees.) In a statement last Friday, the Archbishop [insisted](#) that John Paul had been “cynically deceived”.

John Paul had his own reasons in dealing with rumours and suspicions that flesh was being pursued with avid enthusiasm by highly placed church officials. An enemy of the communist system, indeed celebrated within Poland as a vital figure in undermining it, he was also aware of methods used to accuse and denounce opponents without an iota of evidence. The Catholic Church, and certainly the Polish branch, holds the line on that score.

The view was not shared by the Missouri-based *National Catholic Reporter*. “It is time for a difficult reckoning,” [suggested](#) the editors on November 13. “This man, proclaimed a Catholic saint by Pope Francis in 2014, wilfully put at risk children and young adults in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and across the world.” This “undermined the global church’s witness, shattered its credibility as an institution, and set a deplorable example in

ignoring the account of those abuse victims.” The solution? “Suppress” the cult of John Paul II. History suggests a different trajectory: the saint abused is one adored ever more.

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