

# **VIGANO'S LETTER IMPLICATES JOHN PAUL II, BENEDICT XVI, AND HIMSELF IN THE MCCARRICK COVER-UP**

**By John R. Connolly**

Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano's volley aimed at Pope Francis in his August 25, 2018 letter was the first shot fired by the conservative wing of the Catholic church to attempt to end Francis' papacy and his mission for church reform and to restore the church of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In his letter Archbishop Vigano accuses Pope Francis of participating in the cover up of the sexual abuse misdeeds of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and calls for Francis to resign. According to Vigano, Francis removed the alleged sanctions placed on McCarrick by Pope Benedict somewhere around 2009 or 2010, but Vigano provides no specific date, nor names any particular document or public forum in which these sanctions might have been promulgated. In fact, in the letter Vigano provides no concrete evidence for any of his claims, that Benedict placed sanctions on McCarrick, that Francis knew about these sanctions, and that Francis lifted them. To this day, his claims remain unsubstantiated.

## **VIGANO'S AGENDA**

Although the early headlines, particularly from the U.S. conservative Catholic media and the secular press, focused on Pope Francis' so-called cover-up of Cardinal McCarrick's sexual transgression, the more serious and threatening consequences of Vigano's agenda have been largely overlooked and underreported. The most serious consequence of Vigano's letter is that it is an attack on Pope Francis' whole papacy and his mission to reform the Church, particularly the institutional church. Vigano and some elements of the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, including some U. S. bishops, have been critical of Pope Francis' reform movement

from the beginning of his papacy. The evidence suggests that Vigano is using the McCarrick case as pretext to attempt to undermine the papacy of Pope Francis.

Vigano has chosen to align himself with the right-wing U.S. Catholic bishops and their supporters among the laity in the U.S. Catholic Church. His first letter was initially released by two outlets of the U.S. right-wing conservative Catholic media, the National Catholic Register and Life Site News, (August 26, 2018). Life Site News was founded originally by the Campaign for Life Coalition in 1997. Its website was immediately filled with articles supporting Vigano's claims and it urged people to sign a petition in support of Vigano. The National Catholic Register is owned by EWTN, Eternal Word Television Network, founded by Mother Angelica, PCPA in 1980 and is a voice for primarily conservative Catholic views and conservative political issues. Before publishing his first letter, Vigano shared it with the right-wing Catholic donor, Timothy R. Busch of the Napa Institute, and received his support and endorsement. What we have here is a perfect example of a wealthy conservative Catholic attempting to exercise political influence in the institutional church.

On September 27, 2018 Vigano wrote a second letter reaffirming the charges that he made against Pope Francis in his first letter and declared once again that his testimony was true. Vigano admitted that some of the facts he revealed in his first letter were covered by the pontifical secret which he had promised to observe and actually had observed from the beginning of his service to the Holy See. However, he stated that the purpose of the pontifical secret is to protect the Church from her enemies, not to cover up and become complicit in crimes committed by some of her members. He added that the seal of secrecy is not binding when grave harm can be avoided by divulging the truth. Vigano went on to imply that Pope Francis' refusal to answer his charges was a sign that his charges against Francis were true. Yet, he failed to mention that

Francis had already announced that the Council of Cardinal advisors were in the process of preparing a Vatican response to Vigano's first letter. At the end of this second letter Vigano claimed that Cardinal Ouellet was the one who informed him of Benedict's sanction against McCarrick and that Ouellet had documents that incriminate McCarrick and many in the curia who covered up McCarrick's sexual transgressions against seminarians and priests. Vigano urged Ouellet to bear witness to the truth.

In a follow up Vigano suggested that the sanctions were private. Another speculation about the supposed sanctions maintains that Benedict simply told McCarrick to keep a low profile. Yet between the years 2009-2013 McCarrick did anything but keep a low profile in the Church. He continued to celebrate public Masses, give public lectures, and attend high profile church and civic events. In January, 2012 McCarrick along with other U.S. bishops, including Cardinal Donald Wuerl, made a trip to Rome, during which he met twice with Pope Benedict. During this trip, he concelebrated Mass with Cardinal Wuerl and the other U.S. bishops at the tomb of St. Peter. In April that same year he returned to Rome as part of a delegation from the Papal Foundation to wish Pope Benedict a happy birthday. During a May event in 2012 Archbishop Vigano spoke at an event sponsored by the Pontifical Missions Society honoring McCarrick, saying that the cardinal was "loved by us all," and they posed together with others for pictures.

Among the interesting things revealed in Vigano's letter is the fact the he admits that Rome knew about McCarrick's sexual transgressions against seminarians and priests as early as 2000. However, the implications of this revelation seem to escape him. In the letter he fails to mention that it was John Paul II who appointed McCarrick Archbishop of Washington in 2001 and made him a cardinal later in that same year, even after the Vatican was aware of

McCarrick's transgressions. At this very time, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later to become Benedict XVI, was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and, therefore, also had to have known of McCarrick's transgressions as early as 2000. Vigano admits in the letter that he also knew about the allegations against McCarrick as early as 2000. To his credit he states that he did recommend to his superiors that disciplinary actions be taken against McCarrick both in 2006 and 2008, but no action against McCarrick was taken in either instance. What Vigano indirectly reveals is that John Paul II, Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), and he himself all knew about the allegations against McCarrick as early as 2000 and nothing was done about it until the supposed sanctions placed on McCarrick by Pope Benedict in 2009-10. Does he not realize that he has just admitted to a cover up of McCarrick's sexual transgressions by Rome between 2000 and 2009-10 in which John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and he were all involved? Why did Archbishop Vigano not speak out sooner? Why did he not mention that as Papal Nuncio to the United States between 2011 and 2016 that it was his responsibility, as the representative of Rome, to enforce whatever sanctions, if any, that Pope Benedict had placed upon McCarrick. Why did he not offer his own resignation because of his involvement in Rome's cover up of McCarrick between 2000 and 2009-10? Why did he wait until 2018, five years into Francis' papacy to break the pontifical secret? As it is, Francis is actually the first leader of the church to take any effective action against McCarrick.

On October 6, 2018 the Vatican Press Office, with the approval of Pope Francis, issued its first response to Vigano's charges. The communique presents a summary of how the Holy See has handled the recent allegations of sexual abuse made against McCarrick. It begins with the revelation that in September, 2017 the Archdiocese of New York notified the Holy See that a man had accused McCarrick of sexually abusing him in the 1970s. Francis immediately ordered

a preliminary investigation of this allegation. The results of this investigation, which was carried out by the Archdiocese of New York and sent to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, determined that the charge was credible. On June 20, 2018 Francis accepted the resignation of McCarrick, prohibiting him by order from exercising public ministry, and obliging him to lead a life of prayer and penance. The communique states that this investigation is still in process and that the Holy See will reveal the final results of this investigation.

The communique never mentions Vigano or the charges that he brought against Pope Francis. It simply states that the investigation of McCarrick is ongoing and that the facts of the preliminary investigation will be combined with a thorough study of the documentation on the McCarrick case present in the Archives and the Dicasteries and Offices of the Holy See. However, the statement seems to admit that the Church has made some mistakes in its handling of the McCarrick case. Quoting the communique, “The Holy See is conscious that, from the examination of the facts and the circumstances, it may emerge that choices were taken that would not be consonant with a contemporary approach to such issues.” (Holy See Press Office Communique, 06.10.2018). To this the communique adds a statement from Pope Francis, “We will follow the path of truth wherever it may lead.” (Philadelphia, 27 September 2015). The document goes on to state that both sexual abuse and its cover-up can no longer be tolerated and describes the special treatment of bishops who have committed or covered up abuse as a form of clericalism that is no longer acceptable. The communique concludes with a reminder that Pope Francis has convened a meeting of the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences from around the world in February, 2019.

On Sunday, October 7, 2018, the Vatican released a response from Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops to Vigano’s accusations against Pope Francis.

The document is entitled “Open Letter from the Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, on the Recent Accusations against the Holy See.” Ouellet basically rejects Vigano’s charges against Pope Francis as false, incomprehensible and extremely reprehensible. He denies that Benedict XVI ever imposed formal sanctions against McCarrick. Cardinal Ouellet states that when McCarrick retired as Archbishop of Washington in 2006 he was “strongly exhorted not to travel and not to appear in public, so as not to provoke rumors in his regard. It is false to present the measures taken against him as ‘sanctions’ that were decreed by Pope Benedict XVI and annulled by Pope Francis.” Moreover, Ouellet states that an examination of the archives shows “that there are no documents in this regard signed by one or other pope, nor notes of an audience from his predecessor, Cardinal Giovanni-Battista,” that indicate that McCarrick was given an order obliging him to silence and a private life with the rigor of penal sanctions. Ouellet adds that the reason no formal sanctions were given was that, unlike today, there was no sufficient proof of his guilt at that time.

In responding to Vigano the Cardinal also said, “I cannot understand how you have allowed yourself to be convinced of this monstrous accusation that does not stand up.” He recalls that Francis “had nothing to do with the promotions of Archbishop McCarrick to New York, Metuchen, Newark, and Washington.” But it was he “who removed him from the dignity of cardinal when credible evidence that he had abused a minor was presented [to him].” Cardinal Ouellet concludes his letter with these words: “In response to your unjust and unjustifiable attack, I can only conclude the accusation is a political plot that lacks any real basis that could incriminate the Pope.”

John R. Connolly, Ph.D.  
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