



## Cardinal Corruption

On June 20th allegations that retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, DC, sexually abused a 16-year-old boy in 1971 were found “credible and substantiated” by a New York investigative panel empowered by Pope Francis. In quick succession the pope removed the cardinal from ministry, sentenced him to penitential seclusion, and accepted his resignation from the cardinalate. As additional victims stepped forward, it became clear that the long-ago incidents in New York were but the tip of an iceberg of deception in a very dark sea. An underworld of exploitation came to the surface, unprecedented in its nature, extent, and duration.

Astonishingly, the New Jersey prelate made his predatory desires apparent to his associates for decades, cunningly weaving his seminarians and priests into a widening web of complicity. To his beach house he would frequently invite a group of seminarians for an overnight stay — but always one too many for the available beds. Word got around among his future priests that their bishop would make one of them sleep with him in his.

Father John De Celles has described the heavy toll this bizarre behavior took on clergy morale: “I hardly knew Bishop McCarrick, but since I entered the seminary, I and most of my clerical friends knew the accusations against him. There was no evidence—most of his victims were too afraid to go public, and the ones who did were

ignored. So nothing could be done: you can’t accuse someone publicly on hearsay. But the thing is—everybody knew.”

Priests like Father De Celles watched “in disbelief” as the Bishop of Metuchen (since 1982) was promoted to Archbishop of Newark in 1986 and to Cardinal Archbishop of Washington in 2000. Even after retirement in 2006 the cardinal’s upward path continued unimpeded as he became an influential advisor to Pope Francis.

It is now known that the McCarrick outreach extended beyond priests and seminarians. In 1969, the then 39-year-old Father McCarrick exposed himself to “James,” an 11-year-old boy whom he had baptized two weeks after his priestly ordination in 1958. The abuse went on for 20 years in hotel rooms across the country. “He had chosen me to be his special boy,” James recounted this summer. “If I go back to my family, they tell me that it’s good for you to be with him. And if you try to tell somebody [as James tried to tell his father], they say, ‘I think you are mistaken.’ So . . . you clam up, and you stay inside your own little shoe box, and you don’t come out for 40 years.”

Reporter Julia Duin tried to get victims like James to come out and speak up, but she “ran into . . . blockages everywhere.” She found “priests and laity alike for whom McCarrick’s predilections were an open secret, but no one wanted to go after him.” Numerous other journalists say the same.

As the enormity of the McCarrick corruption sinks in, question upon question arises about how we bishops consciously or unconsciously played along with this diabolic assault on our

apostolic integrity. How did Theodore McCarrick so effortlessly climb the ladder of promotion when “everybody knew” of his brazen homosexual pursuits? Who protected and promoted the scandal maker—and whom did he protect and promote in return?

If we are to restore our shattered credibility as a body of bishops, we must immediately seek to answer these questions and pull up the McCarrick corruption by the roots. To do that, we urgently need to know how wide they run and deep.

In collaboration with Pope Francis we should appoint an independent commission of lay men and women of impeccable reputation and significant investigative experience to track down the truth wherever it leads. Empowered to obtain testimony from bishops and documents from chanceries, the commission would make a public report to the body of bishops of their findings and recommendations. We can hope they would place in our hands a powerful antidote to episcopal corruption. If we administer the medicine well, our lay people and our clergy would have reason to be confident that we are determined to deter.