DISCUSSION OF THE ONGOING SEX SCANDAL IN THE CATHOLIC CHURGH



Writing Samples

Ultius, Inc

August 7, 2018

# Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that the Catholic Church is currently having problems. Recently, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was accused of engaging in sexual improprieties, and this opened old wounds in the Church, insofar as this kind of scandal had already emerged about 15 years ago and was thought to be resolved. The present essay will consist of a discussion of the ongoing sex scandal in the Catholic Church. The essay will be organized into three parts. The first part will provide an overview of the current scenario and the history of the sex scandal in the Church. The second part will then consider the inadequacy of the Church's responses to the scandal. Finally, the third part will reflect on the implications of the ongoing scandal for the moral legitimacy of the Church. The conclusion will be reached that it is difficult to believe that an institution that shows itself to be this craven in the face of scandal could maintain an ongoing claim to holiness.

**Current Scenario and Its History**

The recent McCarrick scandal has to do with a cardinal of the Catholic Church who preyed on boys and young men in a sexual manner. As Otterman has reported, for example: "James was 11 years old when Father Theodore E. McCarrick came into his bedroom in Northern New Jersey, looking for the bathroom."[[1]](#footnote-1) It would be in better taste to not quote the rest. The point is that McCarrick abused his position of authority in order to prey on these boys and young men in this way. As terrible as this is in and of itself, it takes on additional meanings when one considers that it has happened within the Catholic Church. For one thing, the priests within the Church are supposed to be celibate; and for another, the Church condemns homosexuality. So, what we have here is a cardinal (that is, a very high-ranking priest) who engaged in abusive sexual activities with young people of his own sex. It is safe to say that if this is not a scandal, then nothing would be a scandal.

The abuse of power involved in the McCarrick scandal suggests potential links between the situation of the Catholic Church and the #MeToo movement. The phrase "Me Too" was originally coined back an activist back in 2006, but of course it went viral in relation to the recent scandal regarding Harvey Weinstein that roiled Hollywood, which has also led to an accounting for the whole culture of sexual harassment both within Hollywood in particular and America in general.[[2]](#footnote-2) #MeToo has involved primarily women, but not exclusively so. For example, in Hollywood, Kevin Spacey admitted to inappropriate sexual advances on men from a position of power. In this connection, the institutional reckoning facing the Catholic Church could be understood as part of a broader trend of the reckonings regarding sexual abuse and harassment that have come for several other institutions.

When considering the Catholic Church, however, it is important to remember that this is not the first time that this has happened. For example, there was the sex scandal that erupted back in 2002, which in America was centered on the city of Boston. Reports from the time make it clear that the Catholic Church was implicated in this scandal 15 years in the exact same way that they are implicated now.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is why the current wave of the scandal involving McCarrick has proven to be especially painful for Catholics. One would assume that the Church would have become aware of the scandal back in 2002, realized that the situation was completely unacceptable, and then taken the necessary actions to ensure that such a thing would never happen again. Indeed, this is exactly what the Church did in fact promise had been done. it is clear now with the McCarrick scandal, however, that this was just not the case. This scandal demonstrates that the Church just pushed the scandal under the rug without doing anything at the systemic level to address it. The scandal also leaves one anxious about when the next scandal is going to break, since if the Catholic Church cannot be trusted to fix the problem and root it out at the systemic level, then one must unfortunately assume that more revelations are almost certainly in the making.

In other words, similar to the situation in Hollywood, the scandal focusing on a single powerful person (Weinstein, McCarrick) becomes a broader question of what is wrong with the institution within which such a scandal would be able to occur. One of the key themes in the Hollywood situation was that *everyone knew* what was going on, to at least some extent. Everyone had at least heard about the rumors, but they did not pursue knowledge; and others seem to have had active knowledge of the situation but chose to look the other way. Similarly, in regarding the Catholic Church, one is forced to ask: how many of the priests and bishops and cardinals knew what was going on with McCarrick, and when did they know it? If the clergy knew what McCarrick was doing to believing Catholics and let him continue to be a high-ranking priest anyway, then this would not speak well of the clergy and its hierarchy, to put the matter as mildly as possible. If this were the case, then the conclusion would have to emerge that the Catholic Church as a social institution has become a safe haven for sexual predators. The fact that the modern scandal first emerged in 2002 and is still continuing in 2018 suggest that this probably is in fact the case, insofar such a dire problem that could continue for this long is indicative of a problem at the systemic level that transcends the personal culpability of any one individual.

McCarrick has in fact resigned as a result of the recent scandal: "Acting swiftly to contain a widening sex scandal at the highest levels of the Roman Catholic Church, the pope officially suspended the cardinal from the exercise of any public ministry after receiving his resignation letter."[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course this is a very good thing. However, this does not exactly address the institutional crisis implied by the current sex scandal. In particular, assuming that many members of the clergy knew what was happening with respect to McCarrick, they would seem to be implicated in his crimes. In this context, simply accepting the resignation of McCarrick could actually be seen as a way of using McCarrick as a scapegoat in order to prevent a broader and deeper inquiry into the institutional problems of the Catholic Church. This would be similar to if Hollywood had disgraced Weinstein and then decided that everything was just fine, as opposed to asking further questions about the nature of the culture and institution that allowed Weinstein to do what he did.

**The Inadequate Response of the Church**

The response of the Catholic Church to the current scandal centering on McCarrick has been tepid at best. For example, it has been common for many members of the clergy who have been asked about the McCarrick scandal to state that they did not know what was going on. However, this is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, many of these clergy members were in contact with McCarrick, and McCarrick himself was quite powerful within the Church, so it seems face-value implausible to believe that all of these clergy members really had no idea what was going on. Secondly, even if it is true that they did not know what was going on, then the case could be made that they *should* have known, and that this sort of radical ignorance would be a form of culpability in its own right.

Moreover, the members of the clergy have tended to frame the problem as primarily a bureaucratic issue, which it clearly is not. For example, Lawler has reported: "Newark's Cardinal Joseph Tobin (who, by the way, is regarded as one of McCarrick's proteges) has said that the past month's revelations point to a need for better policies and procedures within the Church. But the policies for dealing with homosexual predators have always been in place. The problem has been the unwillingness of Church leaders to invoke the policies, to use proper procedures."[[5]](#footnote-5) The problem is thus decidedly not one of the Catholic Church not knowing what to do in the face of institutional corruption. Rather, it is a matter of the clergy lacking the moral courage to actually root out the corruption in their own midst. There is of course no policy that explicitly *condones* sexual predation within the Church, and there are surely myriad ways to detect such depravities when they happen and then deliver justice. The problem is that a law does not matter if no one cares to implement it.

Pope Francis has been conspicuously quiet about this issue, has have his predecessors. This leads one to wonder how deep the moral rot actually goes, and whether there is some sort of hold that the sexual predators and their enablers (what some have called the "lavender mafia") has on the institution of the Catholic Church as a whole. What is clear is that in the aftermath of the scandals in 2002, the Church promised to address the problem for sure, but then failed to do so. The scandal is back in 2018. And given the inadequate responses of the Church at this time, there is no reason to believe that the magnitude of the problem has now been recognized. In other words, there is no reason to believe that the problem has been rooted out in such a way that it will not emerge again in the future. The only reasonable conclusion is that the problem is still there, because the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has still proved unwilling to do anything decisive about it.

**Implications for Moral Legitimacy**

The ongoing sex scandal within the Catholic Church has serious implications for the moral legitimacy of the Church as a whole. This is because among other things, the Catholic Church is known to hold and promulgate controversial teachings on sexuality, including the ideas that marriage out of wedlock is a sin and that homosexual activity of any kind is a sin. So, when the Church itself is revealed to be a haven for homosexual predators, this cannot help but reflect on the legitimacy of the institution to spread such teachings. It would be an *ad hominem* fallacy to suggest that the teachings are false *because* of the low character of the messengers, but it is nevertheless true that when someone makes a difficult and controversial moral claim, one wants to see that person actually living out and embodying the claim and its implications within his actual life.

Cardinals such as McCarrick clearly did not follow the teachings of their own Church; and the fact that many other members of the clergy probably knew about what was going on but did nothing suggests that they also did not take the problem in a serious way. One question that thus emerges is: if the Catholic Church would harbor and provide protection to homosexual members in its own midst, then what right does it have to speak about the problems of homosexual relations in the general public that are consensual and even characterized by love? The point here is that insofar as the moral authority of the Catholic Church is premised on its own moral integrity, it is difficult to see how anyone could now take the Church seriously when it comes to moral matters, and especially sexual morals.

It would be possible, of course, to suggest that the teachings could be true even if the clergy is corrupt. But to a substantial extent, this would amount to begging the question. The moral authority of the Catholic Church was first and foremost *premised* on the notion that its hierarchy was inspired by God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly indicates that the clergy of the Catholic Church are inspired by the Holy Spirit and that this is the fundamental basis of their moral authority.[[6]](#footnote-6) It would seem to be impossible for any decent person to believe that that the Holy Spirit is present within the hearts of people who sexually abuse children. Members of the Catholic Church, now most prominently former Cardinal McCarrick, have been known to do just that. Therefore, the reasonable conclusion would seem to be that the Holy Spirit is not with the clergy, and that the clergy thus has no moral authority. But insofar as the Catholic Church as an institution *depends* on the authority of the clergy, this would also be the same as saying that the Church itself has no moral authority.

Indeed, this is the conclusion that many thoughtful Catholics seem to be reaching in the face of the ongoing sex scandal within the Church. This scandal is trying the faith of many Catholics who have trouble believing that the fates of their eternal souls could depend on their allegiance to the authority of homosexual child molesters. This is a genuine crisis for the Catholic Church primarily because this has happened before in recent memory, and the Church promised to fix the problem but evidently failed to do so. This suggests that the problem is embedded quite deeply within the institution of the Church as a whole, such that even decent members of the clergy lack either the will or the capacity to do something about the problem. By now, it would also be very difficult for any reasonable person to believe any claims by the Church that it has fixed the problem, save for dramatic reforms that would make the situation clear to all.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of the ongoing sex scandal within the Catholic Church. The essay has discussed the present scandal and its precursors, the response of the Church to the scandal, and the implications of the scandal for the moral legitimacy of the Church. A key conclusion that can be drawn here is that the scandal is not just about McCarrick but rather about a broader institutional rot, in the same sense that the scandal in Hollywood was not just about Weinstein but was rather a sign of a broader institutional rot. The clergy has been spineless in addressing this problem, which makes one skeptical that they intend to do anything serious about. This in turn makes any reasonable person question the moral legitimacy of the Catholic Church as a whole.

Bibliography

*Boston Globe.* "Church Allowed Abuse by Priests for Years." Author, January 6, 2002. https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for- years/cSHfGkTIrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church.* http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p4.htm.

Johnson, Christen A. and K.T. Hawbaker. "#MeToo: A Timeline of Events." *Chicago Tribune,* July 27, 2018. http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html.

Lawler, Philip. "Promoting Predators." *First Things.* July 24, 2018. https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/07/promoting-predators.

Otterman, Sharon. "Man Says Cardinal McCarrick, His 'Uncle Ted,' Sexually Abused Him for Years." *The New York Times,* July, 19, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/nyregion/mccarrick-cardinal-sexual-abuse.html.

Povoledo, Elisabetta and Sharon Otterman. "Cardinal Theodore McCarrick Resigns amid Sexual Abuse Scandal." *New York Times,* July 28, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/europe/cardinal-theodore-mccarrick- resigns.html.

Citation information

You are free to use this sample work for reference and research purposes. However, you **must cite it** and provide attribution to the author. The citation is provided below in CMS format.

Ultius, Inc. (2018). “Discussion of the Ongoing Sex Scandal in the Catholic Church*”.* Free Writing Samples | Ultius. 07 Aug. 2018. Web.

If you need help with Chicago (CMS) style, please visit the [Ultius citation style help section](https://www.ultius.com/help/citation-styles/apa-style.html). Thanks for playing fairly.

www.ultius.com

1. Sharon Otterman, "Man Says Cardinal McCarrick, His 'Uncle Ted,' Sexually Abused Him for Years," *The New York Times,* July 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/nyregion/mccarrick-cardinal-sexual-abuse.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christen A. Johnson and K.T. Hawbaker, "#MeToo: A Timeline of Events," *Chicago Tribune,* July 27, 2018,http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Boston Globe,* "Church Allowed Abuse by Priests for Years," Author, January 6, 2002, https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTIrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elisebetta Povoledo and Sharon Otterman, "Cardinal Theodore McCarrick Resigns amid Sexual Abuse Scandal," *New York Times,* July 28, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/europe/cardinal-theodore-mccarrick-resigns.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Philip Lawler, "Promoting Predators," *First Things,* July 24, 2018, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/07/promoting-predators. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p4.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)