

Is It Time for Pope Francis to Resign?

If an archbishop's explosive claims are vindicated, this papacy must end.

By Robert P. George
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Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick prays in Baltimore, Nov. 14, 2011.

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The world recently learned that former Washington Archbishop Theodore McCarrick had sexually harassed and seduced seminarians and even abused minors. Stunned and angry Catholics demanded to know how church officials failed to stop his predations, which went on for decades. A purported answer came Saturday. Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò issued a “testimony” [accusing](#) several senior Church officials—including Pope Francis —of allowing Archbishop McCarrick, who was also a cardinal, to enjoy influence despite knowing of his evil deeds. Archbishop Viganò, a former papal nuncio (or ambassador) to the U.S., urged the pope to resign.

Many Catholics agree that the pope should resign if the charges are true. But *are* the charges true? What did the pope know about the McCarrick affair and when did he know it?

According to Archbishop Viganò, around 2009-10 Pope Benedict XVI ordered Cardinal McCarrick to leave the seminary where he was living, dedicate himself to private prayer and penance, and avoid public life in the church. As for his many subsequent public appearances, even during the Benedict pontificate (and sometimes with Archbishop Viganò himself), Archbishop Viganò said that the legendarily well-connected cardinal's friends in the curia looked the other way as he defied the sanctions.

Archbishop Viganò claims that Archbishop McCarrick's successor in Washington, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, "lies shamelessly" in saying he knew nothing of his predecessor's immorality and criminality. Cardinal Wuerl also categorically denies that officials gave him any documentation or information regarding sanctions against his predecessor. Someone isn't telling the truth.

The Viganò testimony contains quotations and details about dates and meetings—but also inferences and insinuations. Skeptics argue that he is miffed at not being made a cardinal or out for revenge against churchmen who reject his "conservative" theology. Others have come to his defense by highlighting his integrity and love for the church. They also point to the few and partial denials from the accused.

Yet the Viganò debate is secondary. More important are his testimony's factual claims, which can be vetted with hard evidence. I agree with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: The questions raised by Archbishop Viganò "deserve answers that are conclusive and based on evidence," because "without those answers, innocent men may be tainted by false accusation and the guilty may be left to repeat sins of the past." Let's consider what evidence is public already and ask how the rest can be brought to light.

The National Catholic Register has reported that someone close to Pope Benedict confirmed that the retired pontiff recalls ordering sanctions against Cardinal

McCarrick. Msgr. Jean-François Lantheaume, counselor of the nunciature under Viganò, told Catholic News Agency, “Viganò said the truth. That’s all.” Moreover, Archbishop Viganò stated that Msgr. Lantheaume was prepared to testify that his predecessor in the nunciature had communicated Pope Benedict’s sanctions to Cardinal McCarrick. The Viganò testimony states that “all the memos, letters, and other documentation mentioned here are available at the Secretariat of State of the Holy See or at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, D.C.”

Several documents could conclusively settle who is lying: former Nuncio Gabriel Montalvo’s 2000 report to the Vatican recounting Cardinal McCarrick’s misdeeds throughout the 1980s and ’90s; Archbishop Viganò’s 2006 and 2008 memos on the matter for the Vatican; and Pope Benedict’s instructions for his secretary of state to impose sanctions. Also of interest would be letters about those sanctions from the Vatican to the nunciature, from the Vatican to Cardinal Wuerl, or from a Vatican official to Archbishop Viganò.

It also should be determined if Archbishop Viganò met with Pope Francis on June 23, 2013, between morning Mass and the noon Angelus address. That’s when he says he told the pope of the McCarrick dossier—which also should be made public.

Any materials showing that the pope knew of any McCarrick sanctions before meeting with the cardinal on June 19, 2013, would be critical. Archbishop Viganò’s testimony does not clearly assert that the pope “lifted” sanctions, contrary to some reporting. But he does say that Pope Francis has known since at least the end of June 2013 of a dossier detailing grave sexual offenses. If the pope knew of that dossier and nevertheless empowered the cardinal to represent and influence the church world-wide for five years, the future of this pontificate is in the gravest doubt.

Pope Francis told reporters on Sunday that he would not say a word about Archbishop Viganò’s claims. He added that they could decide for themselves. The only way this is possible is for the pope to order church officials in any office containing pertinent documents to release them. Then we will know the truth.

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