

## The McCarrick scandal: a roundup of different perspectives

By Phil Lawler | Jul 27, 2018

<https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/the-city-gates.cfm?id=1620>

This week I have been swamped with messages from loyal Catholics who have been shaken and disgusted by the latest eruption of the continuing sex-abuse scandal in the Church. I wish I saw some sign that our bishops recognized the rising tide of anger—righteous anger—among the most active lay Catholics.

Unfortunately, Bob Royal [is on target when, borrowing a line from Leo Strauss](#), he says that the American bishops are like Nero, except “they know neither that they are fiddling nor that Rome is burning.” Royal sums up the general level of dismay by saying that it is imperative for Church leaders to learn how the cancer metastasized:

*Finding out how this was possible is going to call for some painful self-examination, both here and in Rome itself. But the alternative is business as usual. And that business is now in danger of bankruptcy.*

In my view the most distressing development of the week was the [craven public statement](#) from Cardinal Sean O’Malley—who, as chairman of the special papal commission on sexual abuse, should be leading the charge against clerical misconduct. Instead he offered a bureaucratic response. He invoked the mossy old dodge that a crucial letter did not reach him. Notice that the cardinal did *not* say that he was unaware of the letter’s contents. But if he wasn’t aware, he should have been; and if he was aware, he should have taken action.

In *National Review*, Michael Brendan Dougherty [did a thorough job](#) of deconstructing Cardinal O’Malley’s letter, along with the protestations of ignorance by Cardinal Kevin Farrell. He argues persuasively that the problem is not an absence of standards, policies, and procedures, but “a fear of confrontation, insufficient zeal, or—most likely of all—...moral compromise and passivity...”

In some cases, bishops showed themselves to be simply tone-deaf: unable to recognize that the patience of their people has been exhausted. Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, who has often been a breath of fresh air because of his willingness to speak plainly, blundered badly with a Twitter comment, saying that despite the latest uproar he was proud of his brother bishops. That prompted a [very lively rejoinder at Catholic World Report](#) by Christopher Altieri, who had a simple, blunt message for the American bishops: “You have all failed us.”

(I am sorry that Bishop Tobin, shaken by the vitriolic reaction to his post, announced that he was deleting his Twitter account, convinced that the forum was an occasion of sin for himself and for others. He will be missed.)

If Altieri was rough on the US bishops, Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* was scathing in [his analysis](#). Douthat made the trenchant observation that although the Catholic blogosphere is buzzing with news and analysis about the scandal, the secular media have taken a much less aggressive approach. Douthat believes that “because of secularization and polarization and the bonfire they have made of their own moral authority, the Catholic bishops are now somewhat protected from media scrutiny by virtue of their increasing unimportance.”

There is a great deal of truth in that argument. The scandal is an important matter for those of us who think that the Catholic Church is important. But for those who are indifferent or hostile to Catholicism, the devastation wreaked upon Church authority during the “Long Lent” of 2002 may be sufficient. On the other hand, Douthat does not deal with another obvious reason why the secular media have shown less interest in revisiting the story: The latest stories are very clearly stories about *homosexual* misconduct, and the secular media are, by and large, favorably disposed to the homosexual cause.

Nevertheless I think Douthat captures the importance of this moment for the Church:

*The question that the church’s leaders need to ask themselves, in America but especially in Rome, is whether they are happy with this settlement—happy to be ignored so long as they can also evade accountability for what’s still rotten in the church, happy to serve out their time as stewards of a declining institution rather than demanding the heads of the men whose culpable ignorance made the decline much steeper than it should have been.*

If anyone reading his column has somehow missed the uproar, J.D. Flynn provides [a thorough briefing](#) on the major elements of the story. Rod Dreher has written on the topic early and often, and his treatments—[just one example among many here](#)—have been exhaustive.

Of course I have been busy, too. My analyses are available here and here and here and here and here on the Catholic Culture site, as well as for First Things.

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