

Transcript of Interview With Cardinal McCarrick

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Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the Washington, D.C., archbishop who became familiar to many Americans as the leading spokesman for the U.S. cardinals during their April meetings with Pope John Paul II on the church's child sexual abuse crisis, says a nationwide policy on how to handle abuse by priests is overdue. Catholic bishops will convene June 13-15 in Dallas to try to hammer out such a policy. McCarrick, 71, met Monday with USA TODAY's editorial board.



Q: We're coming off a bad week of headlines: the ongoing Boston trial, the shooting of an accused molester in Baltimore, the suicide of another priest. What assurances can you give that the problems will be dealt with effectively at June's meeting of the USA's nearly 300 bishops?

A: If I were 300 people, I could give you that assurance. But I'm only one. I can give you the assurance that this one is convinced that we cannot leave Dallas unless we say to the American people, "This is over." That we know exactly, and you know exactly, what is going to happen in every case. I think we have to do that or we're going to Dallas for nothing. How do you prepare for Dallas? First of all, you pray a lot. Secondly, you listen to as many people as you can. Thirdly, you get ready to have something that can be accepted by the bishops, and it's over. If a month after Dallas, some case comes up, we know how to handle it. It's right there, everybody knows what we're going to do, one-two-three-four, and it's done.

Q: Is June too late?

A: We shouldn't have waited until June. We probably should have had a special meeting and done this right away. But maybe it was good we didn't, because this way the Holy Father, the Vatican, was able to step in, and that was helpful. But we can't go any farther than June. One of the problems is that most of us thought we were in charge of it seven years ago. Around 1995, when we had problems here in Washington, we went through all the trauma, and we had all our ducks in line; we thought we were fine. And then we found out that some dioceses were not there. Well, we can't let that happen now. There have to be national standards that every diocese has to accept. We all look to end this, for the sake of the victims, for the sake of the church, the sake of our people.

Q: Do cardinals' opinions about how to handle abusive priests differ?

A: Basically, when the Holy Father spoke to us and said that there is no place in the priesthood for anyone who would harm a child or a young person, I think that became the mantra for all of

us. From what the Holy Father has said, and from just common sense, with regard to looking at this prospectively, from now on, anyone who would do anything like this would obviously be saying, "I don't want to be a priest anymore." If after all we've gone through, someone would still violate the kind of relationship we need with children, with young people, that person should be out of the ministry immediately. So looking forward, I think there is no difference of opinion among the cardinals. Or among the bishops. Everyone I've spoken to feels anyone who would do this now — after we've passed through all this — is either sick, therefore should not be a priest, or defiant, and therefore should not be in the ministry.

Q: What about cases of past abuse?

A: Most are coming to the position of "one strike, you're out," both prospectively and retrospectively. I'm somewhat concerned about this because you can have situations, say 30 years ago, where memories are not as accurate perhaps, or where people might have misinterpreted something. With something that happened 30 years ago you might want to take a good look at it before you say that's an immediate out-of-the-priesthood.

Q: Who would take that look?

A: We should be using our lay people much more than we are now. Every diocese should have a lay board that you would go to and say, "Look, this happened 30 years ago; it has to be public now because otherwise you can't find out if there are any other accusations being made." But if nobody else comes forward, you might want to say, "Do I want to go to a 'one-strike-you're-out' policy, or do I want to see if there's anything else that can be done?" I'm conflicted on this right now; however, it seems we probably are heading toward 'one strike you're out,' both forward and backward. If that's the decision the people seem to be requiring, then I will go along. But I still have some concern. Are we going to be fair and just to someone who had one strike many years ago and has lived a good life from then? We're in the business of forgiveness — but certainly, the victim has to come first.

Q: Are American cardinals and bishops uniform in their support of reporting these abuses promptly to civil authorities?

A: I hope we are. We need a number of elements in what I call a national policy, but is really a series of standards that would be adopted nationally by each diocese. One, you make sure the victim has the counseling and care that person needs. Two, you remove the man immediately from the ministry. Three, you advise civil authorities as required by law. Four, you send the man to a therapeutic agency for an evaluation. If there is still a question, go to your lay board. In any national policy that every diocese was involved in, you need those elements.

Q: Do some in the church's leadership disagree with you about notifying the civil authorities?

A: I have not heard, in the conversations that I've had, anyone say I don't think we ought to report. I think you want to make sure that the accusation is credible, because you could ruin somebody's reputation if you get an anonymous tip and there doesn't seem to be anything in it. But if there's a credible accusation, I would think the bishops, the cardinals, all of us in the

United States, would say you have no choice, you have to report it. I believe we're on the same page.

Q: What about the Vatican? The New York Times reported recently that one high-level cardinal in the Vatican had written an article that seemed exactly contrary to those positions, and that could be a signal from the Vatican that the developing policy of the American bishops was not acceptable. Are you getting any pressure to take a different position?

A: I'm probably not important enough to get pressure from the Vatican. But I have gotten none and would expect none, especially after our visit with the Holy Father. I haven't read that article, but it seems to me that the Holy See is very concerned about the problem, the Holy Father is very concerned about the problem, and most of us would be very surprised and disappointed if the Vatican did not go along with what we are requesting. It seems to me that they are expecting us at the end of our June meeting to present to the Holy See a request that a man who is a notorious, serial offender could be immediately removed from the clerical state, and that a person who in the bishops' judgment could be dangerous to children could also be removed from a clerical state. I believe that that is what we're expecting, and I have no reason to believe that it won't be acceptable in the Holy See.

Q: How certain are you that the Vatican isn't in a different place from the U.S. bishops?

A: When the Holy Father speaks of the power of Christian conversion, I think he's saying someone who has this illness, or has done this criminal action, should not be in the priesthood, but you can't throw them away. You have to forgive them, to love them, to try to help them; if they are sick, to help them continue their lives, not as priests. That's how I've interpreted it. The Holy Father has made it very clear that as far as priesthood goes, this is not going to be. But you can't take them out and shoot them. You have to love them, care for them, as best you can.

Q: How do you reconcile your concern for the victim with the church's increasingly aggressive legal defense in these cases?

A: Behind this is the fear that they would not have enough money to take care of all the victims. Legal action of this kind could create an enormous problem for the church to continue doing the other things that it feels it has to do — take care of the poor, feed the hungry, open schools in the inner city, things like that. In Washington, we have always had the position that we will help victims with counseling, we will help with anything that the person needs for their physical health, but we will not, we have not, made settlements. We've been able to assure our people that any money they give, say to the cardinal's annual appeal, will continue to go, as it always had, to the needs of the people. And that is very important for us to be able to say.

Q: Some of your brother bishops and cardinals say they don't think homosexuals can be trusted in the priesthood. Others say you can't treat an entire class of people as if they're incapable of following the church's teachings. What is your view?

A: You want someone who can live a chaste life; that is key for me. If somebody who would like to go into the seminary says, "All my life, I've tried to be chaste, I'm a heterosexual, and I have

tried to be celibate, and I have proven that I can be," I think you say "Fine." If someone says to you, "All my life I've tried to be chaste, I have a homosexual orientation, but I've always tried to be chaste," I think you do that one case by case. Probably beginning in this next school year, the question of admission to seminaries will be discussed. It might be that the overwhelming weight of opinion will say that homosexuals should not be ever admitted to seminary. I'm not there yet. But if that's what they tell me to do, then that's what we'll do. Certainly, I'm there if we say anyone who has been active in a gay life should not be admitted.

Q: But virginity has never been a requirement for the priesthood. Weren't several saints once married?

A: That's right, not only married, but married non-virgins.

Q: So are they considering establishing that as a criteria, both for people who are homosexual or heterosexual?

A: This is a question I can't answer at this time, because I don't know that. However, I know that in some dioceses in the country, they are very, very strict. The bishop would not admit someone who had been involved in either a heterosexual or homosexual relationship. Now I think, that probably would not be — that certainly is not the universal standard. It would seem to me, that if someone has proven that they can live a chaste life over a long period of time, you give that person a chance. But you'd want to look at it case by case. Because you wouldn't want to fill a seminary with people who've had all kinds of sexual experiences in the past, and unless you were very, very sure that they could be chaste.

Q: Has your archdiocese taken any recent legal steps to make its assets harder to attach?

A: To the best of my knowledge we haven't. Maybe we should have. It seems to me that we're protected by just what we do.

Q: You know that brother bishops have taken a different view, setting up organized trusts.

A: I do, and I don't criticize them, because they may have different situations, or they may feel that they're more comfortable doing it that way.

Q: What is the purpose of counseling for a priest involved in abuse cases, and how successful is it?

A: It helps us to establish that this man is an abuser, that he has to be removed, either because he's going to jail or because we hopefully through this new process will immediately be able to remove him from clerical state. Maybe we can help him to live with himself, and help him to maybe find a job where he will not be into these kinds of temptations. In the old days, 15 years ago, it was the hope they could cure him. That's where so many of these terrible things happened, because these very credible institutions would say this man is OK; we fixed him up. Well, we found out that works perhaps 90% of the time. But we didn't know that it didn't work all the time. Now we do. You can't take a chance.

Q: Some Catholics see an anti-Catholic campaign in these scandals, with your church held to a higher standard.

A: I noted a couple of weeks ago that if this was a Boy Scout leader it would be on page 20, if it was a minister of another religion, it would be on page 6, and if it is a Catholic priest, it's the headline on page one. There are two reasons, one good, one bad. The good reason is that people expect more of priests. The bad is that many people in our society, many of whom are very powerful, see the Catholic Church as the enemy in the questions of life — abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide. They see the church as the enemy in terms of family values, divorce, things like that. They feel if they keep pounding on the church, they will reduce its credibility and the bishops' words will be ignored both here in the capital and our state capitals. You don't want to be paranoid. But as this goes on you can become paranoid. Of course, we brought it on ourselves by not being perfect.

Q: How have Catholics reacted to this crisis of confidence in their church?

A: I cannot give you an answer for the whole country, obviously, and I would think that even in my own diocese that it would vary from parish to parish. I find that where they really love and respect their parish priests, it has not had a great effect at all. Where they find their parish priests to be arrogant or complainers, then this gives them something to complain about themselves. All politics is local, and I think that all religious reactions have a local bent to them.

Q: Has the way you prepare yourself spiritually to do your job changed?

A: I'm praying more. We haven't been focused on the Lord; I'm trying to do that. As I see the bishops losing credibility in many areas, I want to try to be as good a bishop as I can be. I've got a long way to go.

Q: What's your impression of the pope's limitations when you met with him?

A: He's very frail, but he's very wise. When we had lunch with him, he was sitting down so that he didn't have to move around. He was rested, and he kept up with us; we went back and forth. We were there about an hour and a quarter, I guess. He stayed the whole time.

I always try to make him laugh once during the meal. I think it's good for him to laugh, and he always had a great laugh. Many years ago, Father John Krol of Philadelphia was still living but getting older. I was sitting next to the Holy Father in a smaller group. Father Krol, a tough guy, is opposite him in a wheelchair. And I said, "You know, Holy Father, Father Krol looks so good. Doesn't he look well?" Father Krol is looking at me wondering what I'm doing; he used to hate me making fun. I said, "You know, Holy Father, he could take another diocese." And the Holy Father turned to me and said, "Newark" — which is where I was at the time. So he's the master of the one-liner.

By Leslie Smith Jr., USA TODAY