

SCAPEGOATING CARDINAL WUERL

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It is one thing for the laity to be angry about recent revelations regarding former cardinal Theodore McCarrick, and the Pennsylvania grand jury report on molesting priests (which is riddled with lies, see pp.8-10), it is quite another to allow emotion, not reason, to guide one's perspective on these twin scandals. Yet that is what is happening.

The most angry comments are directed at Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington: He is being blamed for the twin scandals. This is patently unfair—there is no basis for either accusation.

I have known Cardinal Wuerl for 30 years. I met him when I was a professor at La Roche College in Pittsburgh, and had the opportunity to assess his record during his first five years of service as the Bishop of Pittsburgh. It was outstanding.

Cardinal Wuerl is not only an authority on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and a prolific author, he is one of the most brilliant and courageous bishops in the nation. He is now being battered by people who know nothing about him, but just want to get the biggest scalp they can find, and that would be the Archbishop of Washington. The haters are found on both the right and the left in the Catholic community, especially the right. They've become delirious.

It is being said that Cardinal Wuerl must have known all about what McCarrick allegedly did and chose to do nothing about it. Aside from rumors, which are a staple in every workplace, Wuerl was in no position to know anything about McCarrick's alleged sexual behavior with seminarians, and he certainly was in no position to know anything about more recent allegations involving minors.

Consider the timeline of McCarrick's predatory behavior with seminarians, which allegedly took place in the 1980s down the Jersey Shore.

When McCarrick was installed as Bishop of Metuchen in 1982, Wuerl was executive secretary to Bishop John Marshall of Burlington, Vermont. When McCarrick became Archbishop of Newark in 1986, Wuerl was an Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle. In 1988, Wuerl became Bishop of Pittsburgh, and in 2006 he took over as the Archbishop of Washington.

In short, Wuerl was in Burlington, Seattle, and Pittsburgh when McCarrick was allegedly preying on seminarians in his home in Sea Girt, New Jersey. To hold him accountable for McCarrick's deeds is absurd and patently unfair. Moreover, he had nothing to do with financial settlements arranged by the Diocese of Metuchen (2005) and the Archdiocese of Newark (2007).

What we do know about Wuerl is that he distinguished himself early on by confronting priestly sexual abuse.

When Wuerl became Bishop of Pittsburgh in 1988, he learned of a few cases of molestation involving minors. Against the advice of attorneys, he met with the victims and their families. A few months later, he removed Father Anthony Cipolla from ministry.

Cipolla maintained his innocence, but Wuerl was convinced he had mental problems, and notified the Vatican about it in 1989. Wuerl told the Congregation for Clergy that "it would be morally impossible to assign Father Cipolla, who is in need of serious psychological treatment, to the pastoral care of the faithful in the Church."

Cipolla appealed to the Congregation for Clergy, but it sided with Wuerl.

In 1991, Cipolla appealed to the Vatican Signatura, the

Catholic Church's Supreme Court. In 1993, the high court overruled Wuerl, ordering him to reinstate Cipolla. Wuerl said no—he would not return him to ministry. Wuerl argued that there were “inaccuracies” in the Signatura's decision and asked the Vatican to reopen the case.

In 1995, the Vatican reversed itself, agreed with Wuerl's assessment, and Cipolla was officially barred from public ministry.

In 1989, the year after Wuerl's first encounter with sexual abuse as a bishop, he launched a Diocesan Review Board. At that time, the bishops had no institutionalized mechanism for assessing sexual offenses—the bishops' conference never had one until 2004—putting him way ahead of the curve.

It is no wonder that Wuerl's courageous decisions were appreciated by so many. Critics on the left, notably the National Catholic Reporter, said in 1993 that “Wuerl should be applauded for refusing to reinstate accused pedophile Father Anthony Cipolla despite a Vatican Supreme Tribunal order.” [Note: Cipolla, like most molesting priests, was a homosexual, not a pedophile.]

In 2002, the New York Times singled Wuerl out as the leader among bishops determined to root out bad behavior. “Bishop Wuerl stands on one end of a broad spectrum of how Catholic leaders have responded to the sexual abuse crisis in the church,” crediting him with “seeking ways to prevent abuse and to hold pedophiles accountable.” [The pedophile myth is a staple in left circles.]

Praise for Wuerl also came in 2002 from Tim Bendig, who claimed he was molested by Cipolla. Speaking of Wuerl, he told CBS News, “I think it's a commendable job. I really do, especially from a victim's standpoint, to have kind of your day in court, if you will, where a bishop—a bishop of the—of the city of Pittsburgh just blatantly says, ‘We don't want

this priest.' And—and he fought it all the way to Rome.”

In 2006, the liberal-leaning Pittsburgh Post-Gazette noted how effective Wuerl was when he was Bishop of Pittsburgh (he had just been appointed Archbishop of Washington). “When other dioceses around the nation were mired in an ugly abuse scandal involving priests who preyed on younger church members, Pittsburgh was unscathed.”

Conservatives such as Michael Novak also applauded Wuerl’s move to Washington. He noted that Wuerl’s “reputation was as one who knows his theology, who is brave and forthright in it, has a good, stout character and is not deterred by criticism.” Novak concluded, “I think it’s a good choice.”

These plaudits, of course, were prior to the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report. The report does raise some questions about Wuerl’s handling of a few cases. News stories are focusing on Father Ernest Paone and Father George Zirwas.

Paone was accused of molestation in the early 1960s and was granted a leave of absence for psychological, physical, and spiritual reasons in 1966. The following year he relocated to California. He never worked in Pittsburgh ever again, and no further charges were made against him. However, he was still under the authority of the Pittsburgh bishop, and in 1991 Bishop Wuerl reassigned him to the Diocese of Reno-Las Vegas.

In the same section of the grand jury report that notes this case, it says the following:

“On June 30, 1989 [one year into his tenure in Pittsburgh], Bishop Donald Wuerl sent a letter to the Vatican with respect to several diocesan priests who had recently been accused of sexually abusing children and whose cases had generated significant publicity. In the letter, Wuerl documented his diocesan policies for sexual abuse and stated his responsibility as Bishop was to determine the course of action in these cases. Wuerl wrote that Catholic parishioners had a

right to know whether a priest accused of such crimes had been reassigned to their parish.”

Father George Zirwas was the subject of complaints between 1987 and 1995. He was sent for psychiatric help in 1988 and was returned to ministry after the therapists said he had been treated successfully.

As usual, they were wrong—psychologists and psychiatrists have long oversold their level of competence—and he was accused again in 1991 and 1995. Wuerl should have removed him from ministry but instead gave him a leave of absence. Zirwas moved to Havana, working with the poor, and was murdered there in 2001.

Wuerl is now being criticized because he allowed Zirwas to receive a stipend and other benefits, and because he presided at his funeral. So what? Wuerl was just following canon law—even priests removed from ministry are not denied some financial support.

Maybe that’s wrong, but it is unfair to pin this on Wuerl. As for the funeral, yes, bishops have been known to preside at the funeral of many despicable persons—it’s what they do. They leave the final judgment to God.

Like everyone, Wuerl must be judged on the basis of his overall record, and in his case it is meritorious. In his 18 years as the Bishop of Pittsburgh, he fielded 19 new cases of accusations against priests. In 18 of those cases, the priest was immediately removed from ministry.

It’s a shame that more bishops don’t have as good a record as Donald Wuerl. It’s also a shame to hear angry Catholics—who don’t know what they are talking about—attack him. Cardinal Wuerl has served the Catholic Church with distinction and is deserving of our commendation, not condemnation.