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Then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick is seen at the Vatican March 4, 2013.
(CNS/Reuters/Max Rossi)



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April 8, 2025

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Clerical abuse advocates and survivors described the [death](#) of defrocked cardinal Theodore McCarrick on April 3 as a "gut punch" for victims still healing after many decades.

McCarrick, who died at the age of 94 in Missouri, was the highest-ranking church leader laicized in modern times when the Vatican [expelled him from ministry](#) in 2019 after the Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith found him guilty of sexual abuse.

"With Cardinal McCarrick's death, we lose one of the great villains of Roman Catholicism in the U.S. I think that's really what it means," said C. Colt Anderson, a professor of Christian spirituality at Fordham University who is writing a book on clericalism and the clergy sex abuse crisis. (In 1954, McCarrick graduated from Fordham, a Jesuit university in New York. In 2018, amid public allegations of sexual abuse against McCarrick, the university announced that its board of trustees voted to rescind his honorary degree.)

As a historian, Anderson warns against minimizing McCarrick's significance or treating his case as an anomaly. The problem is that people are going to forget, because McCarrick isn't some sort of complete outlier, Anderson told the National Catholic Reporter. The fact that McCarrick was able to get away with what he did, Anderson said, is the result of the clericalism that the former cardinal and others had fostered in the U.S. church.

Anderson also said McCarrick's "actions have shown that he absolutely was not committed to the mission of the church, and he was able to use his status and position as a means to obscure his crimes."

When asked if someone like McCarrick could rise again in church leadership, Anderson said it will likely happen because the church has not "done anything to change the fundamental rules of the game."

[Related: Disgraced former Cardinal McCarrick dies at 94](#)

Those unwritten rules, he said, include a presumption that "you should always believe people who have high ecclesiastical position, even when what they say is nonsense."

Anderson criticized the decision-making of church leaders at the highest levels, specifically referencing Pope John Paul II, who led the church from 1978 to 2005.

"John Paul II, who knew McCarrick had young men in his bed, refused to accept that that was a reason to remove him from office," Anderson said. "Why would that be? I think, in a large part, because he was able to raise so much money, because patronage drives so many decisions in the church."

Anderson's comments reference what John Paul II was told by the late 1990s, as revealed in a [2020 Vatican report](#). In October 1999, Cardinal John O'Connor, then the archbishop of New York, [discouraged the appointment](#) of McCarrick in Washington and noted rumors and allegations about his conduct in a letter to the U.S. apostolic nuncio at the time, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo.

In 2020, a [Holy See investigation](#) found that the contents of O'Connor's letter were shared with John Paul II, who later directed Montalvo to contact four New Jersey bishops about the allegations. The 2020 investigation (colloquially known as the McCarrick report) determined that three New Jersey bishops provided inaccurate and incomplete information to the Vatican regarding McCarrick's sexual misconduct. McCarrick was then installed as archbishop of Washington in 2001.

McCarrick was also a prolific fundraiser who, according to records viewed by The Washington Post, sent \$90,000 to John Paul II between 2001 and 2005, when John Paul died. Through the Archbishop's Special Fund, which McCarrick maintained during his time in Washington, the then-cardinal doled out more than \$600,000 to clerics and church figures, including \$291,000 sent to Pope Benedict XVI, who headed the church from 2005 to 2013. The Post [report](#) notes that McCarrick's monetary gifts may have been directed to charitable organizations.

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But for three New Jersey dioceses, the cost of McCarrick's crimes was double his gift to John Paul II.

Attorney and former priest Robert Ciolek [filed for a church settlement](#) in 2004, accusing McCarrick of abuse that occurred when McCarrick was bishop of Metuchen, New Jersey. Ciolek received \$80,000 from the New Jersey dioceses of Metuchen, Trenton and Newark.

A few years later, the Metuchen Diocese [also quietly paid \\$100,000](#) to a separate former priest who was reportedly barred from public ministry after admitting to sexual misconduct himself in his complaint against McCarrick.

An allegation against McCarrick that accused him of abusing a teenage boy during his time as a priest in New York was filed through that archdiocese's Independent Reconciliation and Compensation Program in 2018. That specific allegation, when substantiated, led to [McCarrick's removal from ministry](#).

Upon McCarrick's death, attorney Mitchell Garabedian said in a press statement, "I have represented clergy and sexual abuse victims worldwide for decades. The passing of former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick leaves many clergy sexual abuse victims with ongoing complicated and mixed emotions."

Jesuit Fr. Gerard McGlone, a clerical abuse survivor and former chief psychologist at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, agreed with Garabedian and called McCarrick's death "a gut punch for survivors."

"We have wounds that have been healing and this death just pours acid on an old scar," he said.