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# The McCarrick Report as a Step in Reconciliation and Reform

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## Abstract

*In his latest encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, Francis puts forth an understanding of conflict that helps us to frame The McCarrick Report in the larger ecclesiological themes of Francis's pontificate. While many looked on and saw irreparable damage and risk to the reputation of the Church and its credibility, Francis saw the conflict as an opportunity for real reform. In the encyclical published only one month after the report, Francis writes that "pain and conflict transform us" (FT 226). This theology of conflict, available most succinctly in Chapter 7 of the document, is starkly contrasted to a fear of conflict. Instead, it posits conflict not only as inevitable, but indeed as constructive for Christian communities. For Francis, conflict is not something that must be shied away from by cover-ups or disinterest in reality, but instead the truth must be prioritized at all costs. In this paper, I will use Jon Sobrino's concepts of honesty with (or fidelity to) the real, forgiveness of the real, and the hope that is found in the real in order to argue that The McCarrick Report is a step in the healing and reconciliation of the Church. By reading both documents together, we can understand that instead of utter discord and crisis, Pope Francis sees what Sobrino refers to as "a hope that is made possible by reality itself." Francis inspires in the Church a hope that reform of structures that cause sinful realities is not only necessary, but possible. In a new way, Pope Francis is inviting the whole Church to listen to the clamors of survivors and victims of the systems of domination in which we live.*

In August 2018, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former papal nuncio of the United States, penned an open letter that called on Pope Francis to resign over an alleged cover-up of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's grave acts of sexual violence. Viganò accused Francis of ignoring repeated reports of the Cardinal, including one face-to-face with Viganò.<sup>1</sup> In response, Francis simply said that the letter "spoke for itself."<sup>2</sup> However, only a month later, Pope Francis ordered a thorough investigation of the events named and alluded to in the letter.<sup>3</sup> In November

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Maria Viganò, *Testimony*, August 22 2019 (accessed March 24, 2021) <https://bit.ly/2Rhz439>.

<sup>2</sup> Chico Harlen, "Former Vatican ambassador says Popes Francis, Benedict knew of sexual misconduct allegations against McCarrick for years," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2020 (accessed March 24, 2021) <https://wapo.st/3msB9Vh>.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis orders 'thorough study' of Vatican archives on McCarrick," *The National Catholic Reporter*, November 9, 2020 (accessed March 24) <https://bit.ly/3mpOTQV>.

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2020, the Vatican released the fruits of this investigation in an almost 500-page document.<sup>4</sup> The report was carried out as a direct order of Pope Francis, but it was not a spontaneous decision. Instead, it was largely the result of internal strife and political differences in the U.S. Catholic Church, which quickly turned into public spectacle. The report was carried out under the auspice of the Secretary of State and detailed the rise of former Cardinal McCarrick through the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church beginning in the 1970s until his removal from the priesthood in February 2019 when the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith found him guilty of “sins against the Sixth Commandment with minors and adults, with the aggravating factor of abuse of power.”<sup>5</sup>

In his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis puts forth an understanding of conflict which helps us to frame the report in terms of the larger ecclesiological themes of Francis’s pontificate. While many looked on and saw irreparable damage and risk to the reputation of the Church and its credibility, Francis saw an opportunity for real reform. In the encyclical published only one month after the report, Francis writes, “Pain and conflict transform us.”<sup>6</sup> This theology of conflict, available most succinctly in Chapter 7 of the document, is starkly contrasted to a fear of conflict. Instead, it posits conflict not only as inevitable, but indeed constructive for Christian communities. For Francis, conflict is not something that must be shied away from by cover-ups or disinterest in reality, but instead conflict must be faced through the prioritization of truth at all costs. I will use Jon Sobrino’s concepts of honesty with (or fidelity to) the real, forgiveness of the real, and the hope that is found in the real in order to argue that The McCarrick Report is a

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<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State of the Holy See, “Report on the Holy See’s Institutional Knowledge and Decision-Making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930-2017)” (Vatican City: Holy See, Secretary of State, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, “The Vatican’s McCarrick report: a timeline of events,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, November 9, 2020 (accessed March 24) [ncronline.org/news/accountability/vaticans-mccarrick-report-timeline-events](https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/vaticans-mccarrick-report-timeline-events).

<sup>6</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Vatican Press) sec. 226.

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step in the healing and reconciliation of the Church. By reading both documents together, we can understand that instead of utter discord and crisis, Pope Francis sees what Sobrino refers to as “a hope that is made possible by reality itself.”<sup>7</sup> Francis inspires in the Church a hope that reform of the structures that caused such sinful and criminal realities is not only necessary, but possible. In a new way, Pope Francis is inviting the whole Church to listen to the clamors of survivors and victims<sup>8</sup> of the systems of domination in which we live.

Over ninety victims and other witnesses were cited in the report. Those interviewed are referred to anonymously as Priest 1, Priest 2, Mother 1, Father 1, etc., but are often directly quoted. The report is structured chronologically and thus highlights the resistances and prophetic witness of victim-survivors and their families throughout. It reminds us that victims and survivors did not only come forward after the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. The truth is that those movements came out of much longer struggles to be listened to, which the report points toward through interviews. One mother told of the way she sent several letters to the hierarchy of the Metuchen Diocese in the 1970s after becoming concerned with the way McCarrick, who she refers to as “Ted” throughout her testimony, related to her boys.<sup>9</sup> James Grein, one of the more high profile victims of McCarrick and the first baby McCarrick ever baptized, has spoken out publicly to tell his story not only of the abuse, but of how many people he told who refused to act.<sup>10</sup> The Report does not minimize the length of time in which

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<sup>7</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996), 240.

<sup>8</sup> The terms “victim” and “survivor” will be used in different ways throughout this article. As a minister trained in trauma-informed care, I understand the importance of mirroring language so as to give agency back to those who experience sexual violence. The interchanging use of the words “victim,” “survivor,” and “victim-survivor” should not be taken as carelessness here, but rather as an attempt to not label any one experience of sexual violence as universal. The exception to this is that the word “victim” may be used at some points to emphasize the criminality of the offense(s) since “victim” is the word used in a court of law.

<sup>9</sup> *The McCarrick Report* p. 38

<sup>10</sup> David Porter, “Lawsuit: McCarrick victim told pope of sex abuse in 1988,” *Associated Press*, December 5, 2019 (accessed April 7, 2021) <https://bit.ly/3fUwVod>.

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McCarrick was a serious threat to the most vulnerable. The report gives weight not only to the severity of the acts themselves, but also to the length of time it took to bring them to light and the cover-ups that ignored the problem. It positions the Church hierarchy as a learning subject, having committed errors time and time again. Survivors and victims, by sharing their experiences, become the teaching subjects and their acts of resistance against systems of oppression, including as prophets against the clerical Church, are uplifted and valued.

The radical transparency of the report also sheds light on many inner workings of the Church that had previously been kept out of the public's eye in a confused attempt to maintain trust in the Church. The ascension of bishops, for example, is little talked about by Francis's predecessors and is a conversation maintained in the upper-most spheres of power in the Church. The Canon Law that determines the appointment of the bishops makes the consultation of the "laity outstanding in wisdom" a mere option for the Pontifical legate. Further, the conference of bishops or ecclesiastical province that puts together the list of potential presbyters fit for the job does so "in secret."<sup>11</sup> In detailing the way McCarrick ascended, the Report exposed the Church at its most vulnerable points, giving evidence to how the rise of a pedophile was the result of more than simply McCarrick's actions, but also required an entire system which protected him. For Francis, the task of investigating and then publishing the results of the investigation, which showed a system that valued secrecy and hierarchy over communal discernment and true consultation, was a choice: a choice he made that differed from those of some of his predecessors.

We saw the potential fall out for this in the case of St. Pope John Paul II, who the report found to be personally responsible for the decision to elevate McCarrick to the Archbishop of Washington. The risk to the reputation and standing of the Church's canonization process was

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<sup>11</sup> Can. 377 §1 and §3.

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undoubtedly put at risk. News sources not explicitly in connection to the Catholic Church ran with the hypocrisy of a saint who made a bad decision. *The New York Times* headline read “Vatican Report Places Blame for McCarrick’s Ascent on John Paul II.” The article explains in great detail John Paul II’s decision to elevate McCarrick despite having evidence of his sleeping in the same bed with young seminarians.<sup>12</sup> A few paragraphs later, the article also argues that the report was trying to defend both John Paul II and his successor, Benedict XVI. The article ends with a slight insinuation that McCarrick’s fundraising capabilities were to credit for his ascension despite multiple reports of wrongdoing, stating “over the decades, Mr. McCarrick directed millions of dollars to John Paul II, Benedict and Francis for papal charities through his Papal Foundation.”<sup>13</sup> The article is a damning portrayal to a secular audience. *The Washington Post* also interviewed several theologians on the canonization process in an article titled “Still saintly? Vatican’s new report on McCarrick may complicate the legacy of Pope John Paul II.”<sup>14</sup> Then, of course, there were the contradicting headlines in Catholic news outlets. *America Magazine* ran an article titled “The McCarrick Report and Pope John Paul II: Confronting a Saint’s Tarnished Legacy” on the same day that *First Things* published one with the headline “Theodore McCarrick, Not John Paul II is the Story of the McCarrick Report.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis cautions against a path to peace that aims only to keep up appearances and allows for injustice to continue. He writes that “truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy.”<sup>16</sup> The investigation and consequential public report opened the

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<sup>12</sup> Jason Horowitz, “Vatican Report Places Blame for McCarrick’s Ascent on John Paul II,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2020. (accessed March 26, 2021) <https://nyti.ms/3t26VuT>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Michelle Boorstein and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Still saintly? Vatican’s new report on McCarrick may complicate the legacy of Pope John Paul II,” *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2020 (accessed March 26, 2021) <https://wapo.st/3uxX6FA>.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher White, “Will McCarrick report lead to further discipline, policy changes?,” in *The National Catholic Reporter*, November 11, 2020 (accessed March 26, 2021) <https://bit.ly/3fNcGZx>.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, sec. 227.

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Church up, allowing for critics to take hold and for divisive rhetoric to occur. Despite this predictable outcome, Francis published the report and, if the length is telling at all, did not hold back. For Francis, the truth in its most clear format was prioritized over internal unity or concern for reputation.

Despite the media frenzy, Francis prioritized a public telling of reality as it is. Jon Sobrino, whose theology was formed in the context of serious questions of reconciliation in the wake of the Salvadoran Civil War, characterizes this prioritization of truth over appearance as “honesty with the real.”<sup>17</sup> For Sobrino, this is deeply connected to our status as “beings-with-spirit.”<sup>18</sup> That is to say that we participate in history as inherently spiritual beings.<sup>19</sup> He writes further that the Church, by participating in this same history, must ask questions pertaining to spirituality.<sup>20</sup> From the place of being with spirit, we are called to be honest with the real, even when that reality is difficult or does not fit our agendas. To be honest with the real is to “not subject it to a violence calculated to adjust it to our own tastes and interests.”<sup>21</sup> This honesty, Sobrino says, takes great spirit because sometimes it is not ignorance but in fact lies that cover reality.<sup>22</sup> Sobrino writes, “Honesty to the real, fidelity to the real, and allowing ourselves to be carried forward by the real, are acts of the spirit that, in one form or another, by action or omission, every human being performs.”<sup>23</sup> We live as spiritual beings by our very status as being human, but we can choose to dishonor the reality by covering it up with lies. Alternatively, we can let ourselves be carried and guided by the truthful spirit. In our case here, the myth of

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<sup>17</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 241.

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McCarrick's exceptional status is only a façade to cover the uncomfortable truth that his behavior was not stopped and, in some ways, was enabled by both individuals and structures.

Francis interprets Matthew 10:34-36 in *Fratelli Tutti* in order to argue that this connection to the real, this honesty with the real brought about by spiritual beings, is indeed how Jesus himself lived. In the passage, Jesus says that he has not come to bring peace but a sword, which will split up households, families, and neighbors. Francis says that this is Jesus calling for an utmost fidelity to follow him, even when it brings about inevitable hardship and conflict.<sup>24</sup> Jesus was not afraid of conflict, but it was never conflict for conflict's sake. There was a truth or a reality beyond the conflict that had to be reached.

Sobrino's theology adds onto Francis's understanding of the connection between being followers of Jesus and the honesty or fidelity to the real. For the Salvadoran theologian, following Jesus has not only a Christological dimension, but also a pneumatological dimension. As a Christological assertion, Sobrino's following of the Rabbi Jesus posits Jesus as not only *vere homo*, truly human being, but also as *homo verus*, the true, authentic, genuine human being.<sup>25</sup> We are most authentically human, then, when we are most like what Jesus is. Pneumatologically, the Spirit renders Jesus present in history, available in the concrete reality of human beings. Sobrino writes that "Jesus should be followed, continued, and updated in history—not imitated."<sup>26</sup> In other words, we do not merely decontextualize Jesus and seek to carry out his actions as he did, but instead we understand him as a model for our current historical situation. Jesus, Sobrino argues, is incarnated in the poor and is moved by the suffering of the poor. Compassion, Sobrino says, is therefore a demand of the reality itself. It precedes God, neither chronologically nor ontologically, but anthropologically, for the incarnated God,

<sup>24</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, sec. 240.

<sup>25</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 242.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



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Jesus, was himself moved by reality. Jesus's own fundamental spirituality is therefore the act of allowing reality to move him. Jesus's option for the poor, therefore, comes from the very reality of the poor and from Jesus's own humanity.

For Pope Francis in the McCarrick Report, his option for the poor is the option for the victim-survivors of McCarrick. Just as Jesus is moved by his encounter with the poor, Francis is moved by the encounter with the victim-survivors of McCarrick. He makes an option for them because he understands that grave, criminal injustices were done toward them, and reconciliation is necessary. Forgiveness, though, does not require us to forget.<sup>27</sup> Instead, to move on, the memory of the injustice done must be an honest one. Authentic reconciliation, one that is not shallow or a falsity, is found in conflict that is open to dialogue and patient negotiation with both parties.<sup>28</sup>

Sobrino helps us to illuminate further why bringing McCarrick's actions to light was indeed necessary for forgiveness and reconciliation. For Sobrino, as is the case with many liberation theologians, the presence of sin is rooted in the human heart; it is a part of reality. Forgiveness of the sinner is an act of love because to love someone is to humanize them.<sup>29</sup> Rooted in his Christology of Jesus as the genuine, true, authentic human being, Sobrino understands that to humanize a person means to bring them closer to Jesus. It is to facilitate their own status as being-with-spirit. It is to foster their recognition of the sin in their own heart so that it might change them.<sup>30</sup> It is not to allow the sinner to continue to sin or to engage in acts of misconduct, but instead to stop them from being able to harm again. The presence of sin and therefore sinners is a reality that causes Sobrino to say that what is needed is a "forgiveness of

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<sup>27</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, sec. 250.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, sec 244.

<sup>29</sup> Jon Sobrino, "Latin America: Place of Sin and Place of Forgiveness" in *Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 59.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

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the real.”<sup>31</sup> Honesty and fidelity, being faithful to the real and exposing the truth, are a precursor to this forgiveness of the real. Forgiveness calls on us to change reality so that injustices might end or be mitigated. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis makes the almost identical argument:

We are called to love everyone, without exception; at the same time loving an oppressor does not mean allowing [them] to keep oppressing us, or letting [them] think that what [they do] is acceptable. On the contrary, true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make [them] cease [their] oppression; it means stripping [them] of a power that [they do] not know how to use, and that diminishes [their] own humanity and that of others. Forgiveness does not entail allowing oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing.<sup>32</sup>

This forgiveness which exposes the reality of sin was one of the goals of The McCarrick Report for Francis. The conclusion of the report, the only part apparently penned by Francis himself, reads, “Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient. Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, Francis, in shouldering the weight of the reality in front of him, has sought not to forgive McCarrick himself necessarily, allowing that to be a decision of the victim-survivors, but to “forgive the real.” He is pledging to change the future so that the presence of sin and misconduct might end or be mitigated. The report does not only expose McCarrick, it indeed exposes all oppressors, all clerics who have used the human structures of the Church to commit grave acts of violence and those who refused to act out against sin.

Sobrino finds great hope in this process of letting the Spirit guide us in being honest with the real, no matter where it leads. The hope comes from knowing that things can be different, that fulfillment is accomplished through history and, therefore, there is time and space for great

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, sec. 241.

<sup>33</sup> McCarrick Report p. 449

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conversion. History, a cycle of misery and injustice, is always beaming with possibility. “Always there arises a new Exodus,” says Sobrino.<sup>34</sup> This is exactly what the McCarrick Report represents: the hope that conversion can happen. There is a future for this Church, filled with sinners and blessed with grace, in which sexual violence and lack of accountability are neither acceptable nor unimportant. When we hide from reality and lie to ourselves about what it really is, we stifle this great hope available to us. By continuing to maintain secrecy around the abuses of clerics, we do not allow true processes of reform to take hold.

By surveying these ninety people, survivors and their families, in order to get at the reality that calls us to reform, the report is a model of Francis’s call to be a listening Church to the marginalized, harmed, and oppressed. He writes in *Evangelii Gaudium* that without listening, no genuine spiritual encounter can occur. This again underpins that there is a need to listen to let the Spirit guide us through reality. In several speeches, as well as in several exhortations, Pope Francis has said that a listening Church is a synodal one. Synodality, in part of its most formal definition available to the Church right now, is “the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Australian theologian Ormund Rush explains Francis’s notion of synodality in terms of an “inverted pyramid.”<sup>36</sup> In a new age for the reception of Vatican II, Francis recognizes a need for dialogue amongst all levels of the Church in order to reduce clericalism and mitigate possibilities for abuse of power. In this way, synodality can be taken as a process that walks through the honesty and fidelity of the real, bringing voices in and adding to our fragmentary knowledge sets, toward a forgiveness of the real, aiming to change the structures of the Church. This does not mean that sexual abuse will be solved proportional to a reduction of clericalism

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<sup>34</sup> Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” 239.

<sup>35</sup> International Theological Commission. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. 2 March 2018 [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html)

<sup>36</sup> Ormund Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church” in *Theological Studies* (2017) Vol. 78(2) 299–325

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and an increased horizontal structure. However, it shows that Francis's larger goals and ecclesiological vision is to reform the Church so that abuses of power might be less prevalent. A spiritual encounter for the whole Church, healing, and reconciliation, are facilitated by this process.

On March 24, 2021, Pope Francis named Juan Carlos Cruz, a survivor of sexual violence in Chile to be a member of the Pontifical Council for the Protection of Minors.<sup>37</sup> This is a serious step in many ways, in part because Cruz is an outwardly gay man, but also because Cruz's trajectory with Francis is a particularly powerful story in forgiveness and reconciliation. In 2018, Francis rejected Cruz's accusations of sexual abuse, calling them slander. Eventually, in May of that year, a few months before Viganó's claims surfaced and after a lengthy investigation, Francis admitted he was wrong, invited Cruz to the Vatican, and apologized. Cruz, in several public events, has lauded Francis for his willingness to admit this. In bringing him on as a more formal advisor, there is a symbolic gesture of humility on behalf of Francis. Although it admittedly required scandal and overwhelming investigations for Francis to believe Cruz, the appointment represents a moment of listening and learning and a model of Church with these same attributes.

By walking readers through the inevitable question of "How did this happen?" the McCarrick Report sheds light on a painful reality that the Church had previously shied away from. Sobrino's understanding of spirituality as being intimately connected to concrete reality is therefore a hermeneutical key to interpret the link between the theology of conflict put forth in *Fratelli Tutti*, the McCarrick Report, and the larger cultural changes that Francis is bringing about in the Church. Francis is attempting to create a culture in which learning can occur,

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<sup>37</sup> Gerard O'Connell. "Pope Francis names Juan Carlos Cruz, prominent abuse survivor and whistleblower, to Vatican panel," *America Magazine*. March 24, 2021. (Accessed April 7, 2021) <https://bit.ly/3uAleY6>

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especially by those in power. By setting up structures that allow for listening, he is receiving the theology of Vatican II in a way that past pontiffs have not.

Pope Francis is welcoming the voices of those who have been silenced in the past by the Church itself so that the Church might be transformed and converted toward Jesus himself and the guiding force of the Spirit. Ultimately, the McCarrick Report has implications far beyond McCarrick or the U.S. Church. It represents a shift in the handling of crisis and a new outlook on truthful ways forward filled with hope instead of fear.

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