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OPINION | CATHOLIC CHURCH, HOMOSEXUALITY

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Pope Francis didn't just cover up for McCarrick. It's worse than that.

September 4, 2018 (L'Espresso) – "I have read it, and I will not say a word. You [journalists] read it, and make up your own minds. When a bit of time has gone by and you have drawn your conclusions, maybe then I will speak."

This is how Pope Francis responded - on the evening of August 26, on the flight back from Dublin - to those who asked him about the indictment leveled against him that same morning by the former nuncio to the United States, Carlo Maria Viganò.

A very elusive reply. On a par with other previous reactions of his, every time he has seen himself attacked. As in the case of the "dubia" on his doctrinal correctness raised in 2016 by four authoritative cardinals, whom he never wanted to receive or to dignify with a clarification.

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This time, however, the object of the accusation is not a doctrinal controversy "ad intra," with little impact on secular public opinion, but a question of sex, or rather of homosexuality practiced for decades, with dozens of partners, by an American churchman of the highest rank, who went on to become archbishop of Washington and a cardinal, Theodore McCarrick.

In essence, Viganò accuses Pope Francis of having been informed by him about McCarrick's misconduct as early as June 23 of 2013, but of having done nothing as a result, or rather of having kept the reprobate close to him as his chief adviser in the appointments that are reshaping the Catholic hierarchy in the United States, promoting his proteges. Only this year, following charges that he also abused a minor, did the pope decide to sanction McCarrick and strip him of the cardinalate.

The accusation is of unprecedented gravity and is difficult to contest in its substance, in part because of the key roles that Viganò once occupied in the curia and in diplomacy. But sure enough, in this case as well Pope Francis has chosen not to react. He has left the task of judging to media professionals. Sure that many will speak out in his defense, as has already happened with the "dubia," where in effect the subsequent battle in fact played out in his favor.

But that victory will smile on him again remains to be seen.

The McCarrick case is not the only one of its kind that has gotten Jorge Mario Bergoglio into trouble. There is another one that looks like its exact twin. It concerns Monsignor Battista Ricca (in the photo), director of the Casa Santa Marta selected by Francis as his residence, whom he promoted on June 15, 2013, at the beginning of his pontificate, as prelate of the IOR, meaning the pope's contact at the Vatican "bank," with the right to attend all of the board meetings and to access all of the documentation.

During the second half of that month of June, 2013, the ambassadors from all over the world had gathered in Rome. And it was on that occasion that Viganò, nuncio in Washington at the time, met with Francis and told him about McCarrick's misconduct.

But even the appointment of Ricca as prelate of the IOR, which had taken place a few days before, had created quite a bit of distress among a good number of the nuncios, who had known him as a diplomatic adviser in Algeria, Colombia, Switzerland, and then Uruguay, everywhere displaying conduct that was anything but chaste, especially at his last destination.

In Montevideo, between 1999 and 2001, Ricca cohabited with his lover, former Swiss army captain Patrick Haari, who had followed him there from Bern. And he also frequented cruising spots with young men, getting beaten up one time and another getting stuck in an elevator at the nunciature with an eighteen-year-old already known to the Uruguayan police.

Ricca ended up being removed from diplomatic service in the field and recalled to Rome, where miraculously his career became a success all over again, turning him into a diplomatic adviser of the first class within the structure of the secretariat of state, and above all director of the three Vatican residences for cardinals and bishops visiting Rome, including that of Santa Marta, with the opportunity to establish excellent relationships, including friendships, with churchmen of half the world, including Bergoglio, who as soon as he was elected pope admitted him into his most intimate circle, where he still remains today.

So then, among the nuncios gathered in Rome during that month of June, 2013, there were also those who knew about Ricca's scandalous background and thought that Francis was not aware of it, considering his promotion of this character, a few days before, to nothing less than prelate of the IOR.

So there were those who, during those days, wanted to put Francis on guard by informing him about Ricca's record.

Not only that. Among the numerous witnesses of Ricca's scandalous conduct in Montevideo were some of the Uruguayan bishops, one of whom, after Ricca was appointed prelate of the IOR, felt it his duty to him write an anguished letter in which he asked him, "for the love of the pope and of the Church," to resign.

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And in effect Francis wanted to see clear documentation of Ricca's record while he was at the nunciature of Montevideo. He had it sent to Rome through his own personal channels, without going through the secretariat of state.

In the meantime, in L'Espresso, a very detailed article on Ricca had come out. Who did not react at all publicly, while in private he dismissed as "gossip" all those facts reported against him, and made sure to make it known that the pope, with whom he had met, also considered it "gossip" devoid of any foundation.

Interviewed in July of 2013 by the Uruguayan and Argentine press about the prelate's fate, the nuncio to Montevideo at the time, Guido Anselmo Pecorari, limited himself to this laconic statement: "I maintain that the question is in the hands of the Holy See. And surely the Holy Father, in his wisdom, will know what to do."

The fact is that at the end of the month of July, during the press conference on the flight back to Rome from Rio de Janeiro, where he had gone for world youth day, Pope Francis was in effect questioned by a Brazilian journalist on the Ricca case and the "gay lobby." And this was his actual reply, transcribed as such in the official bulletin of the Holy See:

"About Monsignor Ricca: I did what canon law calls for, that is a preliminary investigation. And from this investigation, there was nothing of what had been alleged. We did not find anything of that. This is the response. But I wish to add something else: I see that many times in the Church, over and above this case, but including this case, people search for 'sins from youth', for example, and then publish them. They are not crimes, right? Crimes are something different: the abuse of minors is a crime. No, sins. But if a person, whether it be a lay person, a priest or a religious sister, commits a sin and then converts, the Lord forgives, and when the Lord forgives, the Lord forgets and this is very important for our lives. When we confess our sins and we truly say, 'I have sinned in this', the Lord forgets, and so we have no right not to forget, because otherwise we would run the risk of the Lord not forgetting our sins. That is a danger. This is important: a theology of sin. Many times I think of Saint Peter. He committed one of the worst sins, that is he denied Christ, and even with this sin they made him Pope. We have to think a great deal about that. But, returning to your question more concretely. In this case, I conducted the preliminary investigation and we didn't find anything. This is the first question. Then, you spoke about the gay lobby. So much is written about the gay lobby. I still haven't found anyone with an identity card in the Vatican with 'gay' on it. They say there are some there. I believe that when you are dealing with such a person, you must distinguish between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of someone forming a lobby, because not all lobbies are good. This one is not good. If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this in a beautiful way, saying ... wait a moment, how does it say it ... it says: 'no one should marginalize these people for this, they must be integrated into society'. The problem is not having this tendency, no, we must be brothers and sisters to one another, and

there is this one and there is that one. The problem is in making a lobby of this tendency: a lobby of misers, a lobby of politicians, a lobby of masons, so many lobbies. For me, this is the greater problem. Thank you so much for asking this question."

Three observations about what Pope Francis said here:

1. In maintaining that he had found nothing worthy of blame in the "investigatio" preceding Ricca's appointment as prelate of the IOR, Francis confirmed that the personal dossier on him that was kept at the secretariat of state had been carefully scrubbed of his scandalous past. But in the preceding weeks Francis also had available to him the accusatory documentation kept at the nunciature of Montevideo, incontrovertible documentation, seeing that on the basis of it the secretariat of state had withdrawn Ricca from diplomatic service in the field. And yet he ignored it.
2. Francis applied to Ricca the typology of those who have committed "sins of youth" and then have repented. But this is never the image of himself that Ricca has presented, rather that of one who has always rejected as baseless "gossip" the accusations against his conduct.
3. And it was in reference to none other than Ricca that Francis pronounced the famous phrase that has become the trademark of his pontificate: "If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him?" With this phrase, Bergoglio reversed completely to his favor in world public opinion an affair that otherwise could have seriously undermined his credibility.

This is the feat that Pope Francis is again attempting today, after the McCarrick affair has been laid bare by ex-nuncio Viganò.

This time as well Bergoglio has refrained from judging. He has put the ball back in the media's court. Where pedophilia is not admitted, but homosexuality is. No matter if it is committed by churchmen who in practicing it completely violate the commitment of chastity that they took on publicly with the sacrament of orders.

Translated by Matthew Sherry, Ballwin, Missouri, USA and published with permission from L'Espresso.

