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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 will go down in history as the year of COVID-19, even in the realm of the Catholic Church. Among other things, the pandemic led the Pope to forgo all pastoral trips outside of Italy. During the twelve months of that “fateful” year, however, other events that were relevant to the life of the Church did take place. In the following pages, we shall list some of the most important news stories covered by the media. Since there is no other way, the selection is based on this author’s criteria, though it does rely on some objective grounds: the “rivers of ink”, as they used to say, that each of these events unleashed. In other words, we have selected those news events that sparked the most conversation and discussion.

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Introduction

This summary of selected events is arranged in chronological order, starting with the publication of the apostolic exhortation on the Amazon Synod in February, and concluding with the report on Cardinal McCarrick, published in November. In between, there is discussion of: the effects of COVID-19 after the outbreak of the pandemic (starting in March), first in Italy and then in other countries; the release of Australian Cardinal George Pell in April; the surprising resignation of Cardinal Angelo Becciu at the Pope’s request, announced on September 24th; the encyclical “*Fratelli tutti*”, presented on October 4th; the confusion created by Francis’ declarations on “civil unions” that were included in a new documentary about him, presented on October 21st; and the complex negotiations between China and the Vatican, with the extension (on October 22nd) of the experimental agreement for another two years.

One may notice two absences in this list. One is the subject of the Pope’s health—a constant in previous pontificates, especially as the age of the pontiff increased. Curiously, the press did not refer to this when Francis turned 84 years old, or in the context of the pandemic. The topic was not covered. The other absence, in this case real, refers to the crisis of the Catholic Church in Germany, with the “synodal path”

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that some see as a gradual separation from Catholic orthodoxy in favor of Protestantism. It has not been selected because although news and commentary were common in the German press, it did not reach the international press.

The exhortation “Querida Amazonia”: the conservative/progressive dialectic

In October of 2019, the Synod for the Amazon was held at the Vatican, with 185 participants, over a period of three weeks. The topic that captured media attention, almost exclusively, was the request to grant priestly ordination to married men. The intent was to address the difficulties of evangelization and access to the sacraments in this geographically complex region. The proposal was approved by a large majority of the assembly—128.

Just four months later, on February 12th, the Pope published the document *Querida Amazonia*, a post-synodal exhortation that summarizes his reflections on that assembly. In that text, there was no mention of the possibility of ordaining married men, nor were there any references to the female diaconate, which was another proposal that arose in the synod hall. If the publication *Querida Amazonia* made the news—when a papal document of local scope rarely appears in the newspapers—it was precisely due to the absence of these proposals, which were framed as a battle between conservatives and progressives. For example, in *The New York Times*—“Pope Francis Sets Aside Proposal on Married Priests”—the label “conservatives” was repeated eight times and that of “liberals/progressives”, five times: it could be said that the use of labels saves us journalists the trouble of having to explain things.

In fact, even in his final speech at the Synod—October 26th, 2019—the Pope stated that he would again commission a study to determine whether there were deaconesses in the ancient Church. Significantly, he did not allude to the priestly ordination of *virī probati* in that speech, possibly in rejection of the polarization that had taken place in the debate, which prevented a calm discussion.

In any case, judging by the text of *Querida Amazonia*, neither the ordination of married men nor the hypothetical female diaconate seems to be a priority for the Pope. He even suggests that focusing only on those issues would run the risk of clericalism and would demonstrate a conception of the Church that is reduced to her functionality. This more ecclesiological part is contained in the last chapter of the exhortation. The other three—which had little resonance in the international media—address the major problems of the Amazon: the situation of the poor and indigenous, the threats to native cultures, and the destruction of the natural environment.

One month before the presentation of *Querida Amazonia* the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* announced the publication of a book, *From the Depths of our Hearts*, on priestly celibacy, signed by Pope Benedict XVI in collaboration with Cardinal Robert Sarah. This editorial initiative was received with surprise and considered by much of the press as an intrusion on the part of Benedict into the government of Francis, who was at that very time considering the issue of celibacy that arose in the synod (it later became known that by that date, the exhortation *Querida Amazonia* was already concluded and in the translation phase).

On the next day, January 14th, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, both Benedict's closest collaborator and Prefect of the Papal household of Pope Francis, made it clear that the Pope emeritus was unaware that he would appear as co-author of the book and that he had not signed any contract with the publisher. He had simply offered a text on celibacy as Cardinal Sarah requested. "It was a misunderstanding, without questioning Cardinal Sarah's good intentions", Gänswein remarked. Cardinal Sarah rejected the accusations, made by some, of having wanted to manipulate Benedict. He also shared his correspondence with the Pope emeritus (which, in effect, offered some ambiguity of interpretation) and declared that "my attachment to Benedict XVI remains intact, and my filial obedience to Pope Francis absolute".

COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had been part of life for people all over the world for almost all of 2020. In the first week of March, the international media reported how Italy—the first country in Europe to suffer its impact—was dealing with the health emergency, the collapse of hospitals, the deaths in solitude, the effects on political, social, and economic life, as well as the implications of the pandemic in the religious sphere. There was also talk of the heroism of some priests who had died after being infected when they were caring for those most in need. Shortly thereafter, it became clear that this sequence of events would be repeated in other countries in the days, weeks, and months that followed.

Bearing in mind Italy's initial prominence, it was to be expected that the media would refer to the pandemic's impact on Rome and the Vatican. The Pope emerged as a relevant figure and voice for considering the meaning of this crisis. Without a doubt, one of the most iconic images of the year was the ceremony over which Francis presided at six o'clock on the rainy evening of March 27th in St. Peter's Square. Alone, in a place that we are used to seeing filled with people, the Pope gave an extraordinary blessing "Urbi et Orbi", along with the image of Mary, "Salus Populi Romani" (Protector of the Roman People), a Byzantine icon that is venerated in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, and a miraculous crucifix that is kept in the Roman church of San Marcello.

"We find ourselves afraid and lost", he said on that occasion. "Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat ... are all of us". Over the following months, the Pope would often return to the idea that we are all in this together and nobody is saved alone. For the Pope, the pandemic brings out "the best and worst" of each person and the conviction that now, more than ever, it is necessary to recognize that the crisis can only be overcome if we all seek the common good.

The confinement mandated in most countries forced a great deal of pastoral activity to move online, without the face-to-face participation of the faithful. The press reported that the pope authorized the broadcasting of his daily Mass, at seven o'clock

a.m. from his residence in Santa Marta: the ceremony was followed by an average of one million seven hundred thousand people in Italy alone.

If thousands of priests from across the globe were involved in streaming activities, the alarm was also sounded—at least in the Catholic world—about the risks of this apparent “success”: the danger of reducing the real Sacrament to the virtual. Pope Francis referred to this in one of his homilies (April 17th): “And this is not the Church [the Church united through communication systems]: this is the Church in a difficult situation, which the Lord permits, but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the Sacraments. Always”.

The paradox that religious services were suppressed right when they were needed most was accepted by the faithful and ministers of worship with initial resignation, out of obedience to general health rules. But there was no shortage of moments of friction, especially when governments relaxed the restrictions for certain activities (bars, restaurants, movie theaters, etc.), but not for churches, despite the hygienic and distancing measures in effect. It is interesting to note that the tendency of the Catholic hierarchy in Europe was to adapt to these measures without seeking legal recourse, unlike in the United States, where different dioceses publicly protested them and even made legal appeals against the measures that they considered detrimental to religious freedom.

There has been no shortage of articles on the meaning of the pandemic and whether it could be understood as God’s punishment for a world that is withdrawing from Him. Francis seems to answer these questions in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: “If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists. I do not want to speak of divine retribution, nor would it be sufficient to say that the harm we do to nature is itself the punishment for our offences. The world is itself crying out in rebellion. We are reminded of the well-known verse of the poet Virgil that evokes the ‘tears of things’, the misfortunes of life and history”.

The Pope does not have a formula for ending the crisis, but in his book *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, written during the pandemic with his British biographer Austen Ivereigh and published on December 1st, he encourages magnanimity: “This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of”. “Let us dare to dream. God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis”. “We need to slow down, take stock, and design better ways of living together on this earth”.

Cardinal Pell: free after 405 days in prison

Cardinal George Pell was released on April 7th. On that day, the High Court of Australia unanimously (7-0) overturned the sentence handed down in December of 2018 by a tribunal of the state of Victoria and confirmed in August of 2019 by the appeal court (2-1), which sentenced him to six years in prison for abuse of minors. Cardinal Pell, who always pleaded “not guilty”, had spent 405 days in prison.

The seven justices of the High Court based their decision—published in a 43-page document—on the reasonable possibility that the applicant did not commit offences and therefore there is a “significant possibility that an innocent person has been convicted because the evidence did not establish guilt to the requisite standard of proof”. In the European justice system, such a decision would have included an obligation to repeat the trial, but not in the Australian system.

The case of Cardinal Pell has captured the interest of the international press for years because he is the highest-ranking person in the Catholic Church to be prosecuted for sexual abuse. Along with his history as Archbishop of Melbourne (1996–2001) and Sydney (2001–2014), Pell served as Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy (2014–2017), becoming a close collaborator of Pope Francis, including as a member of the “Council of Cardinals” for the study of the reform of the Roman Curia (2013–2018).

The alleged abuses were said to have taken place in late 1996 and early 1997, and they allegedly occurred in the sacristy and in a corridor of the cathedral in Melbourne at the end of Sunday Mass. The only evidence against him was the testimony of his accuser, who was thirteen years old at the time. According to the alleged victim, another former choir member of the same age was also abused, but he did not corroborate the accusations and died before the trial began.

Based on the description of the facts, witnesses for the defense questioned whether Pell would have had the opportunity and the time to commit the crimes, since the archbishop used to stop and greet the faithful at the door of the cathedral after Mass; he would arrive at the sacristy to remove the liturgical vestments accompanied by an assistant or master of ceremonies; and, moreover, at those times there were always people coming in and out of the sacristy.

The defense was unable to question the accuser or access the documents that could have cast doubt on his credibility. The judge prohibited the publication of details of the proceeding, to avoid influencing members of the jury. This included reports on psychological disorders for which the plaintiff had received treatment. The judge did not permit the defense to access them, nor did he allow the jury to know that they existed and that the defense had been prevented from consulting them.

The accuser was constantly shielded from public attention: his identity has not been revealed, he testified behind closed doors, and his testimony was never made public. The cardinal, on the other hand, has been the subject of constant unfavorable media coverage since 2013. In fact, it can be said that Pell had been condemned in the “court of public opinion” before the judicial process even began and that this verdict would later have a significant impact in the halls of justice.

There were several commentators who wondered about the reasons for the media outrage against Pell. They concluded that, apart from ideological questions or those related to personal sympathy, this reaction can only be explained by a strong desire for scapegoating that arose in Australian society in the face of the crimes of so many clerics and the negligence of some of the bishops regarding the abuse of minors. Pell was the undisputed nominee, and much of the press went after him. In this sense, it is significant that his first statement upon hearing the news of his release was in that vein: “My trial was not a referendum on the Catholic Church; nor a referendum on how Church

authorities in Australia dealt with the crime of pedophilia in the Church. The point was whether I had committed these awful crimes, and I did not”.

Now that the civil proceeding is over, several questions remain. One is whether Cardinal Pell will now have to go through a canonical trial in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which seems highly unlikely. Judging by the reactions, it also seems unlikely that there will be any apology on the part of those who condemned him in the media for years. In any case, he himself stated that he harbors no ill will against his accusers: “I do not want my acquittal to add to the hurt and bitterness so many feel; there is certainly hurt and bitterness enough”. Months after his release, Pell published a book called *Prison Journal*, in which he reflects on his pain for having been falsely accused and incarcerated, as well as on the meaning of suffering in the life of a Christian.

Cardinal Becciu and Vatican justice

“The Pope accepts Becciu’s resignation and renunciation of cardinalate rights”. The news broke of the dismissal of Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and former “Substitute” in the Secretariat of State (2011–2018), on the evening of September 24th in the most classic “cryptic” Vatican style. No elements for the justification of such a drastic decision were offered, so that explanations were left up to free speculation. Moreover, the impression was conveyed that the guarantees granted to the accused in a state under the Rule of Law do not apply in the Vatican.

The reasons for the Cardinal’s removal and the charges against him have never been disclosed. For the press, the reasons were related to his management (during his time as Substitute) of the economic funds managed discretionally by the Secretariat of State, including those coming from Peter’s Pence, the offerings to the Pope from the faithful all over the world. In recent months, there was news of the unfortunate purchase of a building in London, for which resources from Peter’s Pence were allegedly used, thus diverting the money from alms to speculative funds.

At a press conference the following day, the cardinal explained that in an audience on the previous afternoon, the Pope had told him that “he had lost trust in him”. He stated that the passing of Vatican funds to institutions controlled by some of his relatives was attributed to him. Becciu firmly denied those and other accusations, and weeks later he even filed a criminal complaint against the Italian weekly *L’Espresso*, which had routinely published these reports.

Becciu has worked closely with Francis for several years. “He helps me a lot and sometimes takes the rope off my neck, the rope I put there myself”, the Pope commented with gratitude in his farewell as Substitute for General Affairs, before Becciu moved on to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Proof of this closeness is that Francis himself went to visit him in the hospital when the Substitute was admitted for a fainting spell (which turned out to be inconsequential). And what is even more striking: the press reported that on the first Sunday of Advent, a month after his dismissal, the Pope phoned him to express concern.

The fact that Francis asked him to renounce *ipso facto* the rights of the cardinalate (though not the status of cardinal) raises questions about the seriousness of the accusations. That measure has only been applied in modern history to Theodore McCarrick (2019), for proven child sexual abuse, Keith Michael Patrick O'Brien (2015), for proven sexual abuse, and Louis Billot (1927), for a theological-political conflict with Pius XI.

According to *Corriere della Sera*, Becciu commented to those who called him as soon as they heard the news, "Let them tell me that I was wrong, that I should not have favored my brother and co-operative. But from that to accusing me of a crime and treating me that way!" and went on: "Basically, I distributed the money to Caritas, because as Substitute of the Secretariat of State I had discretionary powers to do so. And the fact that I gave it to a co-operative that was run by my brother may have been a mistake, but it was supposed to help a diocesan project, to give work to sixty Sardinian families".

Without official information, the only news published has been journalistic speculations based on what appeared to be leaks coming from the Vatican or Italian prosecutors in charge of the investigation. Becciu has even been implicated in the process against Cardinal Pell in Australia. It is true that relations between the two were not good when Pell was Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy of the Holy See: one of the reasons for the tension was the unsupervised economic access in favor of the Secretariat of State, to which Pell was opposed. In any case, Becciu strongly denied any connection to the proceedings against the Australian cardinal.

This episode has put the central government of the Church under a cloud of suspicion and distrust. Moreover, it shows the limitations, imperfections, and problems of Vatican civil and criminal law, which is a different area from ecclesiastical canon law. Pending its final resolution, the case has also been accompanied by news on the new measures to ensure greater economic and fiscal transparency in the Vatican. A new papal law (*motu proprio*), effective January 1st, 2021, removes the power to administer investments and properties from the Secretariat of State and transfers it to the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See (APSA), which is the department in charge of managing all the assets of the Holy See. The administration of other goods is also attributed to this entity: those received from Peter's Pence, those which the world's dioceses send to finance the central government of the Church, etc. For its part, the APSA will be accountable to the Secretariat for the Economy, which has a general supervisory role. The Pope had promulgated new rules to promote transparency in the purchases and contracts of the Holy See several months earlier.

Fratelli tutti: an ideal that goes far beyond COVID-19

The encyclical *Fratelli tutti* has already been mentioned in regard to COVID-19: the Pope was actually drafting the text when the pandemic was declared, and he makes several references to it in the same encyclical. Almost all the press reports that spoke of the document—published on October 4th—established a connection with COVID-19, in part to make the text topical. However, it would be reductive to think that its scope is limited to that period.

This encyclical is dedicated to the social doctrine of the Church. It takes its title—as did *Laudato si'*—from an expression of St. Francis of Assisi, from whom it draws its inspiration. It also takes its cue from the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace, better known as the Abu Dhabi declaration, which the Pope signed in 2019 with the Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb.

“Released amid another Vatican financial scandal—wrote *The New York Times's* correspondent—and after changes in church rules regarding sex abuse, the letter steered clear of other contentious subjects. It instead returned often to some of the church's hobbyhorses, including a secularism that has produced what the church sees as a throwaway, consumerist culture”.

The “hobbyhorses” of which the correspondent speaks are, in short, social fraternity and friendship: areas in which the Pope proposes a high ideal and suggests ways to achieve that ideal in the various spheres of coexistence, especially through politics. The Pope himself points out that he has already expressed the ideas he is proposing many times, but now he is placing them in a broader context. A sizeable portion of the document consists of fragments of his writings and speeches.

That may be why Francis' new encyclical has not provoked as much commentary or debate in the media as other pontifical texts. What have been most questioned in the public square are its considerations on the limitations of private property and its attack against what the Holy Father calls “neoliberalism”. Although the encyclical recalls the important role of entrepreneurs, some have interpreted his words as a reprobation of the free market.

For the French intellectual Guy Sorman, “there is no economist, no intellectual, who says that the market is the universal solution to all problems”, in contrast—he says—to what the Pope seems to believe. He also questions the efficacy of other models, such as the cooperative model: “in economics, good intentions do not necessarily produce the desired results”. In reality, what Francis argues is that the market does not have the last say and that the economy is not above ethical principals. For that reason, he calls to “put human dignity back at the center” and to build more just social structures.

For the American theologian Larry Chapp, despite his lack of experience in the economic sphere, Francis re-affirms what every pope since Leo XIII has taught, that is, that we must place people above profits, labor above capital, and the common good above business outcomes.

Francis and “civil unions”: silence and misunderstandings

On October 21st, the international press echoed the statements Pope Francis made in a documentary presented at the “Festa del Cinema di Roma”: “Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God, they have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out of a family, or made miserable over it. What we have to create is a civil union law. They have the right to be legally covered. I stood up for that”.

“In Shift for Church, Pope Francis Voices Support for Same-Sex Civil Union”, was the headline in *The New York Times*. The director of the documentary, Evgeny Afineevsky, who enjoyed extensive access to the Vatican Television Center archives,

told the newspaper that “Francis had made the remarks directly to him for the film”, although he did not respond to the question of when the remarks were made.

In presenting the news, *Associated Press* noted that “while serving as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, the then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio endorsed extending civil union protections to gay couples as an alternative to moves by the country to approve same-sex marriage, which he firmly opposed. However, he had never come out publicly in favor of legal protections for civil unions as pope, and no pontiff before him had, either”.

Although it was only a 20-second segment, the Pope’s words in the documentary *Francesco* were widely amplified in the media. According to the *Catholic News Service*, “the film gave some people the erroneous impression that Pope Francis approved civil union laws that would equate gay couples to married couples”.

All of the news reports emphasized that those statements appeared to contradict a 2003 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which affirmed that “the Church teaches that respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions”.

It was confirmed a few days later that that clip actually came from an interview conducted on May 28th, 2019 with the journalist Valentina Alazraki, from the Mexican channel *Televisa*, which broadcast it without the reference to “civil unions”. That passage had been deleted by the Vatican itself, which reserves the right to edit material given to the media. Months later, however, the clip was offered to Afineevsky by the Vatican itself.

It was also discovered that the Pope’s words had been edited and their original order changed. The clips used in Afineevsky’s film put together quotes from three different parts of the *Televisa* interview, thus creating a sequence that did not correspond to the original. For example, when the Pope spoke of the family, he was referring to the family of origin: “Homosexual persons have a right to be in the family and the parents have a right to recognize this son as homosexual, this daughter as homosexual. Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable over it”.

The clarification came indirectly, through a note from the Vatican Secretariat of State, dated October 30th, which was not intended for public distribution but to inform the bishops through the nunciatures. It became publicly known when the nuncio to Mexico, Msgr. Franco Coppola, posted it on his Facebook page. The press then published its contents on November 2nd.

The letter provides background, saying that over a year ago Pope Francis was asked during an interview [with *Televisa*] “two different questions at two different times that, in the aforementioned documentary [*Francesco*], were edited and published as a single answer without the proper contextualization, which has generated confusion”.

The letter stated that the Pope’s assertion that “homosexuals have a right to be a part of the family. They’re children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out, or be made miserable because of it”, was a reference “to the pastoral need that, within the family, a son or daughter with a homosexual orientation should never be discriminated against”.

The letter explains that the Pope’s remarks about civil cohabitation were made in response to a separate question about “a ten-year-old local law in Argentina on

‘marriage equality of same-sex couples’ and his opposition to them as the then-Archbishop of Buenos Aires in this regard”. It adds that Pope Francis insisted during the *Televisa*’s interview that “it is an incongruity to speak of homosexual marriage,’ adding that – in the same context – he had spoken about the rights of these people to have certain legal protection”.

The letter closes with the insistence that “it is clear that Pope Francis was referring to certain provisions made by states, and certainly not to the doctrine of the Church, which he has reaffirmed numerous times over the years”.

One of the most striking aspects of this case was the Vatican’s reluctance to clarify what was going on. It took more than ten days before any explanation was provided, in a note that was not really intended for the public. There was also not much transparency about the criteria for making the decision to delete a reference to *Televisa* in the original interview. And the same clip was then given to another author.

The long march ahead for Vatican-China relations

The Holy See and the People’s Republic of China have extended the Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops, signed September 22nd, 2018. That agreement—which went into effect in October—provided for a duration of two years “ad experimentum”. On October 22nd, 2020, both parties agreed to extend the experiment for two additional years.

Although the content of the Agreement remains secret, we do know that it asks China to formally recognize the Pope’s authority over the Catholic Church and that he has the final say in the election of bishops. For its part, the Vatican recognizes the legitimacy of the bishops who were previously appointed by the Chinese government and excommunicated by the Holy See (during that time, the Vatican lifted the excommunication of seven bishops).

In the words of Cardinal Secretary of State Piero Parolin, the Holy See recognizes that “the first results have not been outstanding”. For the Vatican, the main result of the Agreement is that—for the first time in 60 years—all the Chinese bishops are in communion with Rome, and there will be no more illegitimate episcopal ordinations promoted by the government without the Pope’s authorization.

Three new bishops have been appointed since the Agreement was implemented, although it seems that the appointment of two of them took place prior to its signing. The number of Chinese dioceses without a bishop is still very high: about sixty, according to the map from the Vatican (or about thirty, according to the redistribution of diocese carried out by the Chinese government without the approval of the Holy See). This does not include Hong Kong or Macao, whose bishops can be appointed by the Pope with complete freedom.

There has been much discussion on the Agreement since its proposal. Prominent figures in the Chinese Catholic Church (such as Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong) consider it a propaganda tool of the Chinese Communist Party. The Trump Administration also held a contrary position, albeit with other nuances.

In a statement to *The Tablet*, Chris Pattern, the last governor of Hong Kong (1992–1997), came out in favor of anything that could improve the lives of Chinese

Catholics, but maintained that ever since Xi Jinping came into power, religious freedom has taken multiple steps backward, and he considers it “bizarre” to try and normalize relations under these circumstances.

One of the main concerns that critics have is the possible lack of freedom to denounce human rights abuses so as to avoid compromising bilateral negotiations. The silence about the political repression against the demonstrators in Hong Kong and about the persecution of the Uyghur Muslims has drawn attention in this regard. It has come to light that a text prepared for the Angelus address on July 5th, which included a message to the people of Hong Kong, was not delivered by the Pope. That text said that the contentious situation “requires courage, humility, nonviolence, and respect for the dignity and rights of all. I hope that social and especially religious life may be expressed in full and true liberty, as indeed several international documents foresee”.

On the case of the Uyghurs, a brief comment by the Pope in the aforementioned book, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, written with Austen Ivereigh, was enough to provoke objection from Beijing. This refers to a passage in which Francis includes “the poor Uighurs” among the peoples he thinks about and prays for: “I think often of persecuted peoples. The Rohingya, the poor Uighurs, the Yazidi—what ISIS did to them was truly cruel—or Christian in Egypt and Pakistan killed by bombs that went off while they prayed in Church”. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said that the Pope’s words had no “factual basis” and that “the Chinese government has always protected the legal rights of ethnic minorities equally”.

To add further intrigue to this case, various media outlets, including *The New York Times*, published detailed reports that a group of Chinese hackers had infiltrated “the Vatican’s mail servers” and “the Holy See’s Study Mission to China”, a Hong Kong-based institution that in fact represents the Holy See to mainland China. Recorded Future, a cybersecurity firm based in the United States, said that the attacks on these and other Catholic institutions—which took place from May through July—were perpetrated by RedDelta, an organization backed by the Chinese government, and that they were “most likely connected to negotiations over the extension of the 2018 agreement”. Monsignor Javier Herrera Corona, head of the Holy See Study Mission, said in a statement that his institution had experienced a long history of cyberattacks, but he noted that the Vatican does not discuss information related to the negotiations through electronic channels, suggesting the damage caused by any breach would be limited.

The signing and first experimentation of the Agreement comes at a time when the state is tightening its control over religious activity in China. This tightening has not been mitigated even though the authorities have been more flexible in allowing religious communication online during the pandemic confinement period. The fundamental fact is that a channel of communication now exists between the Vatican and China, albeit theoretically limited to a single subject.

Cardenal McCarrick: lies and mistakes

There were those who were supposed to inform and instead kept silent about some of the information, those who were supposed to evaluate the facts and underestimated

them, those who were supposed make decisions and took erroneous measures in good faith; and then there was, above all, a key figure who made lying a constant in his own life. That is how one could summarize the long-awaited report on the former Cardinal Archbishop of Washington, published by the Holy See on November 10th. The report had been commissioned by Pope Francis in October of 2018.

In 446 pages, the report attempts to shed light on how it was possible for Theodore McCarrick to achieve such an impressive ecclesiastic career despite the suspicion that followed his conduct for so many years. McCarrick has been recognized as a perpetrator of abuse, sexual harassment of and improper acts with young seminarians, and some abuse of minors, over a period of about twenty years, from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s. During that time, he was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of New York (1977), Bishop of Metuchen (1981), and Archbishop of Newark (1986); and more recently Archbishop of Washington (2000) and Cardinal (2001). Moreover, he maintained a strong public presence both in his country and internationally.

The report reviews the documentation on the case that is available in the archives of the Holy See, the nunciature in Washington, and the U.S. dioceses. The report is complete with about ninety interviews with ecclesiastical officials, victims, and witnesses, including Pope Francis, Benedict XVI—through his secretary Msgr. Ganswein—and McCarrick himself. The work was coordinated by the Vatican Secretariat of State and carried out by Jeffrey Lena, a Californian attorney who is well-established in Rome, and who in recent decades has defended the interests of the Holy See in American courts.

The report highlights the inadequacy of the ecclesiastical authorities' response to the accusations against McCarrick and shows how it took years to go from rumors to concrete evidence. Part of the reason is that the Holy See's investigations were very superficial, and no attempt was ever made to speak with the victims or eyewitnesses.

Although the whole description shows that it would be frivolous to try and reduce this mass of errors and blindness to a single culprit, the report has been the impetus for some attacks on the memory of John Paul II, in whose pontificate McCarrick's career unfolded. The synthesis at the head of this section is most strongly manifested in the actions of John Paul II: there were bishops (mentioned by first and last name) who should have reported and instead kept quiet about some of the information, and others who should have evaluated the facts and underestimated them, and finally those who should have taken action and instead took erroneous measures in good faith.

With the information that we have today, it is clear that the Pope made mistakes, but it is also clear that he never covered up those cases. And so, it is highly offensive to refer—as some did—to his “complicity in the clergy sex abuse scandal”. Or to try to call his canonization process into question. John Paul II was deceived, just like the many others whom McCarrick deceived and manipulated.

Going forward, one could say that the report is relevant not only for its content, but above all for its significance: it is the first time that, in order to clarify a dark chapter in the life of the Church at the highest level and with those involved still living and active, confidential documents were unveiled and testimonies on the actions related to the topic were revealed. A precedent has been set that will be difficult to ignore when similar circumstances arise.

For some commentators, such as the editor of *Crux*, John Allen, the decision to publish the report is of undeniable importance: “it’s possible the McCarrick report may be remembered as the single most consequential step toward reform during the Francis papacy, not only because of what it reveals about this particular case, but the precedent it sets for how all future cases ought to be handled. Once the genie of transparency is out of the bottle, that is, it’s going to be awfully difficult to put it back in”.

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