

THE DEMOCRATS FAVORITE POPE



Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, then the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, delivers a sermon at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington in March 2016. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

By [Chico Harlan](#) and [Stefano Pitrelli](#)

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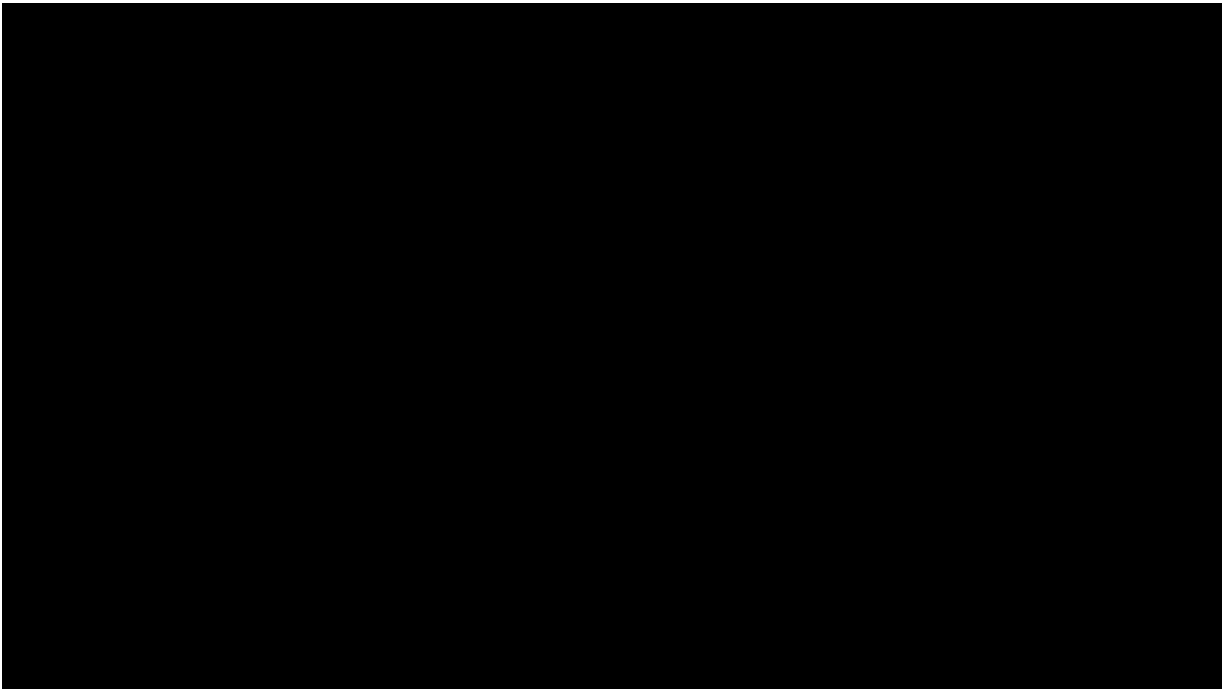
ROME — In the instant he became one of the most controversial figures in modern Catholic Church history, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò went dark.

The retired Vatican ambassador to Washington wrote a [bombshell letter](#) last summer calling on Pope Francis to resign on the grounds that he had tolerated a known sexual abuser. As that letter was published, Viganò turned off his phone, told friends he was disappearing and let the church sort through the fallout.

Nine months later, in his first extended interview since that moment, Viganò refused to disclose his location or say much about his self-imposed exile. But his comments indicate that, even in hiding, he is maintaining his role as the fiercest critic of the Francis era, acting either as an honorable rebel or, as his critics see it, as an ideological warrior attacking a pope he doesn't like.

Viganò corresponded by email with The Washington Post over two months, writing 8,000 words in response to nearly 40 questions. He was blistering in his criticism of Francis, saying “it is immensely sad” that the pope is “blatantly lying to the whole world to cover up his wicked deeds.”

[\[Read Viganò's exchange with The Washington Post\]](#)



On Feb. 16, the Vatican announced it had defrocked ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick after finding him guilty of sexual abuse while in the priesthood. (Reuters)

The Vatican has had little official response to Viganò. A communications official declined to comment for this article. But Francis last month [responded](#) for the first time to Viganò's letter. The pope said he knew “nothing, obviously nothing” about the misconduct of then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and could not remember whether Viganò had warned him about McCarrick in

2013. Viganò said he told Francis that McCarrick had “corrupted generations of seminarians and priests.”

“How could anybody, especially a pope, forget this?” Viganò wrote to The Post.



Viganò addresses a crowd during a Palm Sunday mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in April 2014. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

[McCarrick was defrocked](#) in February, after the allegations exploded into public view and he was found guilty in a Vatican proceeding of “sins” with minors and adults.

[*\[Former Vatican ambassador says Popes Francis, Benedict knew of sexual misconduct allegations for years\]*](#)

In his correspondence with The Post, Viganò offered detailed thoughts about church dealings, but he resisted personal questions — and he declined requests to meet in person. Viganò wrote that he has become “more careful about whom I meet and what I say.” He said questions about him were “irrelevant to the serious problems facing the Church.”

“My life is quite normal, thank you for asking,” he wrote.

Viganò wrote “n/a” in response to questions about where he is living, whether he believes his safety is under threat and how his actions in August have otherwise altered his life.

He wrote that the Catholic Church has not contacted him since several conservative church news outlets initially published his

accusations. He described himself as an “old man” who “will be appearing in front of the Good Judge before too long.”

Viganò, 78, was two years into his retirement when he came forward with his letter, a stunning break for a lifelong church representative who had held major bureaucratic posts inside the Vatican and represented the Holy See in several countries as a diplomat.

“My silence would make me complicit with the abusers, and lead to yet more victims,” he said.



Viganò, the Vatican’s then-ambassador to the United States, listens to remarks at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ annual meeting in 2015. (Patrick Semansky/Associated Press)

Although Viganò’s letter focused on one case — McCarrick’s — it became a touchstone for a wider and fierce struggle over internal corruption, the [role of homosexuality](#) in abuse and whether Francis is leading the church astray.

Viganò wrote last year that both Benedict XVI and Francis had known about McCarrick’s misconduct. But he portrayed the former pope as attempting to take quiet disciplinary action against the then-cardinal and Francis as patently ignoring those sanctions.

Last month, [private letters](#) disclosed by a former McCarrick aide supported Viganò’s claim that the Vatican had told McCarrick to retreat from public life during Benedict’s papacy. But it is also clear that McCarrick swiftly ignored his orders from Rome, even while Benedict remained pope. No documents have surfaced

showing whether Francis knew of the sanctions against McCarrick by the time he became pope in 2013.

[\[Despite denials, D.C. Cardinal Donald Wuerl knew of sexual misconduct allegations and reported them to Vatican\]](#)

Viganò said the “truth will eventually come out” for Francis, as it had for Cardinal Donald Wuerl, a former archbishop of Washington who portrayed himself last summer as being unaware about complaints against McCarrick — a claim that documents subsequently [proved false](#). Viganò suggested to The Post that Francis is covering up other cases, “as he did for McCarrick.”

For Catholic traditionalists — a group that includes some bishops and cardinals, as well as pundits, journalists and everyday members of the faith — Viganò has become a revered symbol, although an absent one.

“He’s certainly acquired a very strong moral leadership in the Catholic world,” said Virginia Coda Nunziante, president of Italy’s March for Life committee.

Viganò frequented conservative church conferences and antiabortion events before the release of his testimony; now, he is a no-show. He keeps in touch with people only on his own terms, calling them from a Skype account that does not resemble his name.

Many in the Catholic world think that Viganò — long known for his hot temper and inner-Vatican rivalries — is neither credible nor interested in stopping sexual abuse. They note that documents show he tried to quash

an investigation of a Minnesota archbishop accused of misconduct, an accusation Viganò denies. They also say that his testimony last summer was a barely veiled attack against gays in the upper ranks, and that his real goal was to weaken Francis rather than to help the church.

“There is an element of Machiavellian exploitation” with Viganò, said Austen Ivereigh, a papal biographer.

Even before his public criticism of Francis, Viganò was a figure of controversy. As ambassador to Washington, he took heat for arranging a meeting between Francis and Kim Davis, a county clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in Kentucky. He was recalled from the post in 2016, amid allegations that he had become entangled in the conservative marriage fight in the United States.

Viganò was among the senior clerics to have received money from Michael J. Bransfield, a West Virginia bishop accused in a [mass corruption scandal](#) revealed this month by The Post. Viganò said aides told him it would be an affront to decline the money, so he donated it to charity.



Viganò, then the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, blesses the altar at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in March 2016. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

Viganò, in his responses to The Post, made it clear that he is watching even smaller moments inside the Vatican. He cited an exchange from a Vatican news conference in February in which a journalist asked [Archbishop Charles Scicluna](#), who has handled

church sex abuse cases, about a case in Argentina. Scicluna began to answer, and the Vatican spokesman cut in, saying the news conference — held during a [landmark abuse summit](#) — was not a time to “focus on individual cases.” Results of an investigation of the case would later be released, the spokesman assured.

[*\[Private letters indicate the Vatican imposed, but didn't enforce, restrictions on former cardinal McCarrick\]*](#)

“One may be forgiven for wondering whether the results of an honest and thorough investigation really will be released, and in a timely fashion,” Viganò wrote. “There is a certain irony here: This exchange happened while [the summit organizers] were discussing what they themselves called transparency.”

As far as the McCarrick case, the Vatican pledged in October to conduct a “thorough” study of its archives and reveal what it finds out about who knew what. The church has since said only that an investigation is ongoing.

“The results of an honest investigation would be disastrous for the current papacy,” Viganò wrote to The Post. He also acknowledged that such an inquiry may harm the reputations of more traditionalist pontiffs, Benedict and John Paul II, who presided over McCarrick’s rise.

“But that is not a good reason for not seeking the truth,” Viganò said. “Benedict XVI and John Paul II are human beings, and may well have made mistakes. If they did, we want to know about them. Why should they remain hidden? We can all learn from our mistakes.”

Viganò did not respond directly to a question about whether he has documents to back up his claims.

“The time has not yet come for me to release anything,” Viganò said, instead calling on the pope and other Vatican officials to release documentation, “assuming they have not yet destroyed it.”

Viganò also spoke in detail about one of his most contentious beliefs: that the sexual abuse crisis would be “far less severe” if the “problem of homosexuality in the priesthood were honestly acknowledged and properly addressed.”

[\[When the Vatican faces a major sex-abuse scandal, he's the man the pope sends in\]](#)

The question of whether homosexuality has anything to do with abuse has divided the Vatican hierarchy. Studies show that there is no correlation between sexual orientation and the likelihood to commit abuse. Francis has emphasized not homosexuality, but the vast power chasm that priests take advantage of when abusing younger victims. But people such as Viganò raise the point that 80 percent of clerical abuse victims are male, and that the majority of those are 14 and older.

“Given the overwhelming evidence, it is mind-boggling that the word ‘homosexuality’ has not appeared once, in any of the recent official documents of the Holy See” on events dealing with abuse and youth, Viganò wrote.

He said a “gay mafia” among bishops, intent on protecting themselves, was “sabotaging all efforts at reform.”

Viganò referenced only two regrets about his letter last summer. He said that he wished he had spoken out sooner. He also said that, “in retrospect,” he would have softened the call for Francis to resign — a demand that even Viganò’s supporters said was far-fetched and distracting.

Viganò now leaves open the possibility that Francis could repent, and says the pope should step down “if he refuses to admit his mistakes and ask for forgiveness.”