

[News](#)
[Vatican](#)
[Analysis](#)



Cardinal Angelo Sodano, now dean emeritus of the College of Cardinals, is assisted with his coat as he leaves Pope Francis' annual audience to give Christmas greetings to members of the Roman Curia at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2019. At left is Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state. The pope has accepted the resignation of Cardinal Sodano as the dean of the College of Cardinals. The pope changed the norms to specify that the dean would be elected to a five-year term, renewable once, instead of being elected for life or until choosing to resign. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Jason Berry

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

December 27, 2019

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

A scene in "The Two Popes," the charming new Netflix movie, has Anthony Hopkins as a brooding, gentle Benedict XVI hearing the unprompted confession of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, played by Jonathan Pryce in an adroit balance of modesty and intellectual force. The Argentinian has gone to Rome seeking to retire at 75. Benedict rebuffs that. The tender plot distorts the reality of ecclesiastical ambition. Bergoglio reveals his agonizing struggle in the Dirty War as a young provincial, trying to protect a divided Jesuit community from the sadistic regime. Then, Benedict begins *his* confession, referencing "Fr. [Marcial] Maciel" — the notorious pedophile and Legion of Christ founder. At this point, director Fernando Meirelles cuts off the words: facial expressions convey Benedict's remorse, speeding the plot past clergy sexual abuse.

In real life, a menacing shadow to both popes belonged to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, a native of Piedmont in northern Italy. Sodano was the great protector of Maciel and other notorious predators. He was also a loyalist of Chile's dictator, Augusto Pinochet, during the 1980s as papal nuncio in Santiago. Sodano helped Maciel gain support of affluent Chileans in establishing Legion schools there. In 1991, Pope John Paul II, impressed with Sodano's anti-Communist credentials, made him Vatican Secretary of State. For nearly two decades he advanced the careers of most of the men who became Chilean bishops under John Paul and Benedict, along with many Vatican diplomats and officials in the Roman Curia who owed him allegiance.

Sodano, 92, was the church's most powerful cardinal of the last generation. On December 21, Pope Francis "accepted" his resignation as dean of the College of Cardinals, in which post he practiced Machiavellian politics on a breathtaking scale. Sodano swallowed his fate in a photo-op with a smiling Francis and one of those

ornamentally-phrased Vatican documents when a big man gets sacked. The pope's *motu proprio* (on his own initiative) performs a [verbal bow](#) to Sodano, "whom I thank warmly for the high service rendered to the College of Cardinals in the nearly fifteen years of his mandate." The document stipulates a five-year term for future deans, renewable if a pope so desires.

News headlines were unkind. "Cardinal tainted by abuse scandal steps down as dean," [trumpeted Crux](#). In 1998, Sodano blocked Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger from prosecuting Maciel after eight Legionaries [filed a canonical grievance](#) in his Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith tribunal. Maciel was dismissed from ministry in 2005 after Ratzinger became Benedict XVI.

Advertisement

On Sodano, the [Irish Times](#) was harsher: "Cardinal (92) who 'sought deal' to bury sex abuse documents resigns." According to the veteran religion reporter Patsy McGarry, when the former president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, traveled to Rome in 2003, she met with Sodano who tried "to secure, through her, agreement that Ireland would not attempt to access church documents in Commissions of Inquiry surrounding the handling of allegations of clerical sex abuse." McAleese, who spurned the request, called it "one of the most devastating moments in my presidency."

Like a bull stampeding moral values, Sodano used his authority to protect the guilty, block reformers, and assist schemers trying to cash in on American dioceses selling church property, in part to satisfy legal claims in the abuse cases. This was done by his nephew, Andrea Sodano, a building engineer in Rome, in a buy-low, sell-high scheme targeting parishes in financially troubled dioceses. Cardinal Sodano promoted Andrea's partnership with the flashy Raffaello Follieri at a [2004 launch party in New York](#). The business crashed in 2009 when its CEO Follieri went to federal prison on fraud and money-laundering charges. He sent \$365,000 via wires to Andrea Sodano in Rome for alleged structural engineering studies, according to documents provided to this writer under a Freedom of Information Act request. Beyond a subpoena's reach in Rome, Andrea refused to give testimony. Theodore Cacciopi, the FBI agent who built the case, called Andrea "an unindicted co-conspirator."

Nepotism comes from the Italian, *nipote*, meaning nephew.

At the time of McAleese's trip, Cardinal Sodano was also working hand-in-glove with Msgr. Stanislaw Dziwisz, John Paul's closest aide, to block the canonical process against Maciel, while neurological disease took its toll on the pope.

"Was it mere coincidence that on the day of Sodano's exit, the Legion of Christ, whose money he took and interests he long championed, announced an internal investigation of abuse with the order?"

[Tweet this](#)

[As reported in NCR in 2010](#), Legion priests gave lavish financial gifts to Sodano and Dziwisz, the gatekeeper for attendance at private Masses in the apostolic palace. (After John Paul died, Benedict made Dziwisz a cardinal; he has since retired in Poland.) The funds channeled to those and other curial officials were, as one priest said, "an elegant way of giving a bribe."

The Legion gave Dziwisz \$50,000 to secure a Mexican benefactor and his family seats at a private papal Mass. Dziwisz, who rarely speaks with reporters, refused my interview requests at the time; so did Sodano. The cardinal received separate gifts of \$10,000 and \$5,000 from the Legion, according to two of its former priests, who likened those gifts to the tip of an iceberg. In late 2004, five months before John Paul died, Ratzinger bolted from Sodano's control and ordered the investigation of Maciel that would culminate in his dismissal after the cardinal became pope. Even then, Sodano made sure the language of the papal decree singled out the Legion of Christ for praise without a word of consolation to victims.

On Dec. 26, the [Washington Post reported](#) that Sodano was among the prelates who received a check from former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, one of the many payments the disgraced cardinal sent to high-ranking church leaders responsible for managing clerics or handling sex-abuse allegations. Sodano "received \$19,000 from 2002 to 2016, the records show," the Post stated.

"The Curia is a brotherhood," Sodano [told the New York Times](#) in 1992. In his 16 years as Secretary of State, the Vatican equivalent of a prime minister, Sodano kept an iron grip on the Roman Curia, or papal bureaucracy. He promoted the careers of many Vatican diplomats who maintained their loyalty.

In 1995 John Paul was silent on the accusations of sexual abuse by former seminarians against [Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër](#) who "retired" as archbishop of Vienna, provoking a huge scandal. On a 1998 visit to Rome, Groër's successor, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and several Austrian bishops told Ratzinger they were "morally certain" of Groër's guilt. Sodano wanted silence, no questioning of the brotherhood which included cardinal-archbishops. At the time, he prevailed. Schönborn, who has met frequently with abuse victims, [told reporters several years later](#) that Sodano "literally said '?? to my face' 'Victims? That is what you say!' "

Benedict shared Sodano's notion of a brotherhood; he disliked seeing grievances made public. He summoned Schönborn to Rome for a 2010 meeting to smooth things over, prompting the [NCR headline](#): "Kiss-and-make-up session won't end debate on Sodano."

The tide was turning against Sodano. Survivors in many countries, linked by the internet, intensified demands for justice that emboldened newsrooms, prosecutors, legislators and the courts. Today, bishops and cardinals face legal pressure they never remotely imagined, particularly in Mexico and Chile.

Benedict's failure to resolve the abuse crisis extended to his faltering control of the Curia. When the Vatileaks scandal exploded in 2012, and the discovery that his own butler had leaked sensitive papal documents, Benedict realized he lacked the power to engineer reform, and announced his historic retirement.

Ironically, Sodano, as Dean of the College of Cardinals, played a key role at the 2013 conclave to the benefit of Cardinal Bergoglio, who had finished second to Ratzinger in the voting in 2005. Though 84 by then, and well beyond the voting age of 75, Sodano controlled the agenda of the cardinals' meetings over several days before they entered the Sistine Chapel for the secret voting.

As Robert Mickens wrote in a [2018 piece for La Croix](#), "Vatican Godfather," Sodano worked quietly to push cardinal electors behind Bergoglio.

"For some three decades he was the man in the Vatican no one dared to cross," wrote Mickens. "Even the popes he served were careful to gain his consent because of the loyalty he commanded from many key people at all levels of the Roman Curia."



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Angelo Sodano, now dean emeritus of the College of Cardinals, during his annual audience to give Christmas greetings to members of the Roman Curia at the Vatican Dec. 21, 2019. The pope has accepted the resignation of Cardinal Sodano as dean of the College of Cardinals. The pope changed the norms to specify that the dean would be elected to a five-year term, renewable once, instead of being elected for life or until choosing to resign. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Perhaps that base support is why it took so long for a reform pope, engineering canon law changes to undercut de facto immunity of the brotherhood, to finally sack Sodano. Events in Chile were surely a factor. In 2015, Francis scoffed at the widespread criticism in Chile of Bishop Juan de la Cruz Barros, whom he appointed prelate of Osorno, despite Barros' well-known role as an inner circle protégé of Fernando Karadima, a pedophile suspended from the priesthood after a Vatican investigation. Many years before, Sodano as nuncio socialized with Karadima, pastor of an affluent parish that Pinochet officials attended. Sodano vouched for Barros as bishop. On the day of his installation in Osorno, [demonstrators cried](#), "Barros, get out of the city!" People inside the church as seen on TV reports were unruly, yelling

protests from the pews. Sodano's idea of a high ecclesial brotherhood was being hammered in Chile.

After meeting with three of Karadima's victims in Rome, including Juan Carlos Cruz, a national figure in Chile for his activism and a gripping memoir, Francis changed his mind, ordered an investigation by Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the canon lawyer who built the case against Maciel. Scicluna's voluminous report caused Francis to make an even sharper turn in his view of the Chilean church's swamp of scandals. The nation's 31 bishops tendered their resignations, something unheard of in modern church history. He has accepted nine to date, including Barros' notice.

Chile's scandal-mired bishops were a blow to Sodano's credibility, given his role in choosing many of them.

Angelo Sodano personified a fortress-church mentality eroding before our eyes. The day before the Vatican issued the pope's statement on Sodano, the Associated Press reported that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the office in which Cardinal Ratzinger in 2001 consolidated responsibility for hearings to defrock pedophiles, had processed 6,000 cases. "At one point Francis lamented that it had a backlog of 2,000 cases," [reported Nicole Winfield](#). "But the CDF now must cope with the globalization of the scandal that in 2001 seemed to be largely confined to the English-speaking world."

Was it mere coincidence that on the day of Sodano's exit, the Legion of Christ, whose money he took and interests he long championed, announced an internal investigation of abuse within the order? What impeccable timing. The Legion stated that 33 priests and 71 seminarians had sexually abused minors over the last 80 years. Maciel had 60 victims, said the Legion, seeking to cast itself in a self-reforming light.

In his native Mexico, Maciel was a celebrity with deep support among the nation's bishops until his reputation tanked. He died in 2010, at which point his three children by two women surfaced in the news. As Mexican abuse survivors in Mexico attacked the Legion report, Monterrey Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera called it "late, incomplete, and under a cloud of suspicion." Cabrera blamed Vatican authorities for defending Maciel over the years in "a very large criminal cover-up" and a "criminal silence."

And so with the legacy of His Eminence, Cardinal Angelo Sodano.

[Jason Berry's books include *Render unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church.*]