

Another View: Is John McCormack still the bishop of Manchester?

Guest Commentary

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ACCORDING TO the regulations and customs of the Roman Catholic Church, only the Pope can designate or remove the title of Roman Catholic bishop. Since the Pope has designated John McCormack as bishop of the Diocese of Manchester, in the eyes of the Vatican and those who swear strict allegiance and absolute obedience to the Vatican, it is clear that John McCormack was and still is bishop and leader of New Hampshire Catholics.

What is less clear is how many outside the Vatican still consider John McCormack as a leader of New Hampshire Catholics. In recent decades, the title of Roman Catholic bishop has been recognized as a symbol of respect and moral leadership by both Catholics and non-Catholics in the Granite State. Citizens of New Hampshire looked to the bishops of Manchester to provide moral direction and unite the community in acts of charity and good will.

How many now look to John McCormack for moral leadership? In the last three years, hundreds have arisen in the streets, media and other public forums to demand that McCormack be held accountable for his role in hiding and protecting pedophile priests over a two- decade long period. Only a handful have publicly stood to support him, few if any in recent times as McCormack's role in the clergy abuse horror has become clearer and clearer. With more than 300,000 Catholics in the state, are there not at least 10 who still consider McCormack to be an able moral leader? From public statements, it does not appear so.

But perhaps public opinion is a poor means of judging a man's character and moral sense. History has on occasion recorded men who have been widely denounced by their contemporaries, but whom on closer inspection have been lauded as moral leaders for taking a stand that was misunderstood at the time. Does John McCormack need a public forum to explain his actions and gain our support?

I invite Mr. McCormack to join me in an informational debate open to the public and media. This will provide a fair opportunity for McCormack to present his side of the story of his role in the clergy abuse crisis, as well as giving me an opportunity to present the opposing view. To afford Mr. McCormack every opportunity for a fair hearing, he may select up to three advisers to stand with him and provide informed council; I will stand alone. McCormack may also select the place and time of the event, as well as the moderator. The rules will be simple. Mr. McCormack will have five minutes to present his views, I will then be given five minutes to respond or present my own arguments. We will alternate in five minute intervals for 90 minutes, or some other time interval to which we mutually agree. The moderator will ensure that each side has equal time allotments and that the debate remains civil and respectful.

Is John McCormack still bishop? Do the people of New Hampshire accept him as a moral leader? Will he explain his position in public discussion or continue to hide in fear and denial?

Rick Webb is co-founder of Speak Truth To Power, an advocacy group for victims of sexual abuse by priests.