



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 12, 2010

Bishop John B. McCormack to Retire

Today is an important day for New Hampshire Catholics. It is the 75th birthday of Bishop of Manchester John B. McCormack, the former assistant to Bernard Cardinal "I fought the" Law in Boston. Bishop McCormack must, therefore, submit his notice of retirement to His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, and for many in the church, that is added reason to sing: "This is the day the Lord has made/ Let us rejoice and be glad in it."



It is more than a local or statewide issue for the roughly 300,000 Catholics in the Granite State. McCormack's tenure here has been relatively uneventful, but revelations of his maneuverings in the archdiocese of Boston, where he was responsible for shuttling actively homosexual and pedophile priests from one parish to another while withholding information about their predatory sexual habits, have inspired calls for his resignation since news of his role surfaced in a series of *Boston Globe* exposes starting in 2002. McCormack, who was installed as Bishop of Manchester in 1998, has quietly but steadfastly ignored such calls and has continued in the role of "wounded healer," the known sinner who brings God's mercy and forgiveness to others, the disgraced bringing grace to the hearers of God's word, as the shepherd of souls and minister of His healing Sacraments.

In contrast to his involvement in the coverup of the Boston scandals, the clerical sins McCormack had to deal with in the statewide diocese of Manchester were committed well before his arrival, with many of the allegations of child abuse concerning incidents that allegedly occurred many years and even decades earlier. But it was on his watch that the church in Manchester, as in Boston and elsewhere around the nation, had to shell out millions to settle the lawsuits resulting from the claims. The Manchester diocese also was forced to agree to a settlement with the state's attorney general's office, subjecting church officials and procedures for dealing with and protecting youth to state oversight and approval. In the furor and disgrace of the sexual scandals, it seemed hardly noticed that the independence of the church had been sorely and embarrassingly compromised.



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The state's largest newspaper, the *New Hampshire Union Leader*, long ago joined the call for the bishop's resignation, significant for the fact that the Manchester daily has been generally and generously pro-cleric and sympathetic to the Catholic Church, making common cause with many Catholics and other conservative Christians in opposing liberal abortion laws and same-sex marriage legislation. During McCormack's reign, the diocese made a well-publicized stand against the civil union and later the same-sex marriage bills that the state's Legislature passed and Democratic Governor John Lynch, a Catholic, signed into law. But in the battle over parental notification, approved by the Legislature in 2004, but repealed in the next session, the Church's opposition was more muted, appearing to blend in with the altar fixtures and the non-controversial art in the stained-glass windows.

The bishop's stand on a planned merger — deceptively called an “alliance” — of the Catholic Medical Center with the secular Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical facility has also been a sore point for many Catholics who wish to preserve the Catholic hospital in Manchester as an independent institution faithful to the moral precepts of the Catholic Church. In the late 1990s, the Catholics fighting for an independent CMC finally prevailed against a plan to merge the West Side hospital with the cross-town Elliot Hospital, a plan that was finally shelved after a determined popular protest and an intervention by the state's Attorney General, who opposed the measure as a matter of probate law. McCormack's predecessor, Bishop Leo E. O'Neil, was mainly passive during that controversy. O'Neil, however, unlike his successor, had a warm rapport with, and enjoyed the high esteem of, the state's Catholic people and institutions until his death in 1998.

It is expected the Pope will waste little time in accepting the bishop's mandatory retirement. How long it will be before a successor is named remains anyone's guess. In the interim, it appears likely that Auxiliary Bishop Francis Christian will assume the leadership role until a replacement is named.

The Catholic Church has never been known to move swiftly to rectify wrongs or to fill vacancies. In 1984, after Pope John Paul II issued a formal pardon of the astronomer Galileo, some 400 years after his condemnation for heresy, comedian Mark Russell quipped: “Now that Galileo's been pardoned, when is Henry VIII going to get that divorce?”

God being merciful, it is believed that a successor to Bishop McCormack will be named in a matter of months, rather than years or even centuries.

Photo of John B. McCormack: AP Images



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