News

A banner of St. John Paul II is seen behind a sculpture of him May 16, 2018, at the St. John Pau

A banner of St. John Paul II is seen behind a sculpture of him May 16, 2018, at the St. John Paul II National Shrine in Washington. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)



by Lucy Grindon

View Author Profile
lgrindon@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

November 20, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

While Pope John Paul II's canonization has been increasingly questioned in light of a Vatican report detailing abuses committed by former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, don't look for quick name changes on the scores of Catholic schools and other institutions named for the papal saint.

In the United States, there are more than 40 schools named after Pope John Paul II — at least 20 primary schools, 20 secondary schools, and one university. In addition, churches, foundations, organizations, public spaces and shrines called "St. John Paul II," "Pope John Paul II" and "John Paul the Great" can be found all over the country and the world.

Since the McCarrick report's revelation that John Paul II was warned about sexual abuse and misconduct allegations against McCarrick before he appointed him Archbishop of Washington, D.C., in 1999, the late pope's speedy canonization has been questioned and criticized in both religious and secular media. The National

Catholic Reporter, for one, in an editorial called upon the church to "suppress the cult" surrounding the saint.

"The recent report detailing the Vatican's response to the scandal surrounding ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick shows why it's a mistake to canonize popes (or anyone) quickly after their deaths," Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese wrote in his latest "Signs of the Times" column.

"Pope John Paul II was no saint. Neither is Pope Francis," declared a Nov. 16 Boston Globe headline on a column from associate editor and columnist Joan Vennochi.

Schools and churches named for Pope John Paul II are not likely to be renamed hastily, if at all. The names of parishes and diocesan schools are decided by dioceses, school and church administrators say, and bishops have not called for or discussed the renaming of any institutions during their ongoing fall assembly.

Advertisement

At St. John Paul II Parish in Mt. Olive, Illinois, the pastor, Fr. Tom Hagstrom, told NCR his community's attention has primarily been focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, so there has not been much public discussion of the McCarrick report, and no one has suggested to him that the parish's name should be changed.

"Of course," Hagstrom said, "you can't change the name of a consecrated church, but you can change the name of a parish." (The parish was last renamed when it was formed by the merging of two former Mt. Olive parishes, Ascension and Holy Trinity).

But Hagstrom, who became the pastor three years ago, thinks it's unlikely the parish's name will be changed again. "We didn't accept the name of John Paul because of his personnel policies," he said. "We had regard for him for his teaching and his witness by his own suffering as he battled his final illness of Parkinson's."

"We didn't take the name of John Paul II as a favor to ex-Cardinal McCarrick," Hagstrom added. "Sometimes we have to stop and think, you know, [a] saint is not the equal of God. I mean, God is the one who knows everything and makes no errors," he said. "There are saints who've had some pretty iffy kinds of behaviors."

As one example, he noted, "Athanasius, the great theologian, was a dirty fighter — he did not fight fair."

A priest at another parish named for John Paul II, who wished to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the McCarrick scandal, said someone had contacted a church employee about the blame placed on the church's namesake in the McCarrick report, but he said he could never make a decision about the parish's name without consulting the diocese.

Administrators at John Paul the Great Catholic High School in Dumfries, Virginia, and John Paul II High School in Plano, Texas referred NCR to their respective dioceses for comment.

Amber Roseboom, director of media relations for the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, told NCR in an email that a name change for the school in Dumfries is not being considered.

[Lucy Grindon is an NCR Bertelsen intern based in Los Angeles. Her email address is lgrindon@ncronline.org.]

Editor's note: *Updated to reflect statements of administrators at John Paul the Great Catholic High School in Dumfries, Virginia, and John Paul II High School in Plano, Texas.*

This story appears in the **The McCarrick report** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 11-24, 2020** print issue under the headline: Schools, churches named for St. John Paul II won't be renamed quickly.