News



The progressive pride flag, at left, flies over city hall in Worcester, Massachusetts. (Courtesy of Guillermo Creamer Jr.)



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Bishop Robert McManus of Worcester, Massachusetts, has stripped a Jesuit middle school for disadvantaged boys of its official Catholic status, after the institution flew flags representing the Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ pride movements.

In an official decree released June 16, McManus declared that Nativity School of Worcester may not use the title "Catholic" to describe itself and that Mass and the sacraments can no longer be celebrated on its premises.

Under the decree, which the bishop said is effective immediately, Nativity is also not permitted to sponsor any liturgies in a church building or chapel within the diocese. The school will also no longer be listed or advertised in the diocesan directory. McManus said Nativity cannot undertake any fundraising activities that involve diocesan institutions. He also ordered the school to remove retired Worcester Bishop Daniel Reilly from its board of trustees.

In his decree, McManus insisted that Nativity's decision to continue flying the Black Lives Matter and pride flags despite his objections had sent a "mixed, confusing and scandalous message to the public about the Church's stance on these important moral and social issues."

"Despite my insistence that the school administration remove these flags because of the confusion and the properly theological scandal that they do and can promote, they refuse to do so. This leaves me no other option but to take canonical action," McManus wrote.

In a prepared statement posted on the school website, Nativity School President Thomas McKenney said the school will appeal the bishop's decree through the Catholic Church's "appropriate channels." He also said the school will continue to display the Black Lives Matter and pride flags "to give visible witness to the school's solidarity with our students, families, and their communities."

"Commitment to our mission, grounded and animated by Gospel values, Catholic social teaching, and our Jesuit heritage compels us to do so," McKenney said.

Nativity began flying the pride and BLM flags in January 2021 after its students — the majority of whom are people of color — called on school leaders to show support

for making their community more just and inclusive, McKenney said.

"These flags simply state that all are welcome at Nativity and this value of inclusion is rooted in Catholic teaching," McKenney said.

However, the school's position did not satisfy McManus, an outspoken conservative prelate who in his 18 years as a bishop in central Massachusetts has clashed with local Catholic colleges over matters pertaining to abortion rights and gender identity .

In March, McManus told Nativity to remove the flags or risk losing the right to call itself a Catholic school. Later that month, McKenney said, someone tore the school's flags down, an act of vandalism that he said " caused harm to our entire community."

While restating church teachings that prohibit unjust discrimination and call for respect toward LGBTQ persons, McManus said in his decree that it was his "contention" that the pride flag represents support of gay marriage and "actively living a LGBTQ+ lifestyle."

Regarding Black Lives Matter, the bishop suggested that the phrase has been coopted to promote a platform "that directly contradicts Catholic social teaching on the importance and role of the nuclear family and seeks to disrupt the family structure in clear opposition to the teachings of the Catholic Church."

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In recent weeks, the bishop's criticisms have rankled many in and outside Worcester, including Guillermo Creamer, Jr., a member of the Worcester Human Rights Commission who is gay and graduated from Nativity in 2008.

"The reality is that it's unfortunate the bishop has decided to play this game, because that's what this is, it's a game," said Creamer, who accused the bishop of engaging in theatrics to appeal to conservative Catholics.

"I believe the bishop doesn't really stand for what Catholic values are, especially the Catholic values I was taught growing up," Creamer said.

Marianne Duddy-Burke, the executive director of DignityUSA, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that advocates for LGBTQ rights within the Catholic Church, described the bishop's decree as "a shameful denial of the Gospel."

"This is a blatant move to position the Worcester diocese, and the larger Catholic church, as aligned with a certain side in the U.S. culture wars. This move is certain to horrify the large majority of Catholics who support LGBTQ+ equality," Duddy-Burke said in a prepared statement.

Since its founding in 2003 as an independent Jesuit school, Nativity has educated students from disadvantaged backgrounds in grades five through eight. Families pay a $250 activity fee, but no tuition.

According to the school's website, nearly half its 61 students this past academic year were Black, 33% were Hispanic, 20% were multiracial and 2% were white. As a multicultural school, McKenney said the flags represent "the inclusion and respect of all people." He said the past few months of controversy have been "galvanizing" for the school community.

Said McKenney, "Nativity is stronger than ever because of the understanding and support of its amazing community members, benefactors and — most of all — students and their families."