News



Bishop Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Missouri, in September 2024. McKnight is now archbishop-elect for the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas. (OSV News/ The Catholic Missourian/Jay Nies)



by Mark Pattison

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Last fall, Bishop Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Missouri, faced a backlash after he decreed that a dozen hymns could no longer be used at churches in his diocese. The most familiar one was Marty Haugen's "All Are Welcome."

Within days, the bishop, now archbishop-designate of Kansas City, Kansas, backtracked. He essentially acknowledged his error and issued a new decree, in a move that revealed the kind of flexibility not often seen in leaders of American dioceses.

McKnight worked his way out of a mess of his own creation by issuing another decree — his third in six months — on liturgical music in the diocese. And he did it with the help of synodality.

On April 8, a day after the third decree was issued, Pope Francis appointed McKnight to the Kansas City Archdiocese in his native Kansas. He will be installed May 27, at the Church of the Nativity in Leawood, Kansas.

"Having a decree blow up on you and having to rescind it in less than a week, that was a hard thing," he told NCR in a phone interview, three days after his appointment was announced.

Vatican scholars contacted by NCR about McKnight said they liked the new appointment he was given, emphasizing that the archbishop-designate is a good communicator, is able to connect with his fellow prelates across the theological spectrum, and is part of a new generation of clergy in today's church, aware of the challenges it faces.



Bishop Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Mo., greets catechumens during the Rite of Election at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Columbia on the first Sunday of Lent, Feb. 26, 2023. (OSV News/The Catholic Missourian/Jay Nies)

Russ Kremer, a fifth-generation farmer in Frankenstein, Missouri, who served on McKnight's pastoral council in Jefferson City, hailed his "exceptional leadership skills."

Kremer said McKnight is leaving the diocese stronger than it was when he took the reins in 2018. "He never forced anything down anybody,"he said.

McKnight said the consultation on the original hymns blacklist decree had been poor, and that the diocese hasn't done enough formation of parish musicians. The one saving grace, he said, was the synodal process that resulted in the latest decree. "The end result, it would have never happened without some kind of synodal consultation process," he said.

When the archbishop-designate was introduced to the Kansas City Archdiocese in an April 8 press conference, the Wichita native said he will now be closer to "my favorite quail hunting ground" in the state. He also mentioned that even as he led the Jefferson City Diocese, he was a Kansas City Royals fan.

But he also admitted that the offer to lead the archdiocese threw him for a loop, recounting that he had been at a confirmation ceremony at a parish in the Jefferson City Diocese when he got a call from Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the papal nuncio to the United States. "I was standing at the time, and I quickly took a seat," he said.

The archbishop-designate said he wasn't given any marching orders for Kansas City, just like he wasn't for Jefferson City. "It was basically presented, 'The Holy Father has appointed you. Do you accept, or don't you?' " he told NCR.

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His initial flurry of thoughts after the Kansas City call dealt with the archdiocese's finances, vocations and pastoral life. "Then I came to the realization: What difference does that make? If there's a particular agenda someone wants me to do, they haven't told me," he said. "They are relying on me to go in and to lead the diocese."

William Shawn McKnight's grandfather ("Big Bill") and father ("Little Bill") were also firstborn sons. Rather than stoke confusion, his parents said, "We'll call him Shawn." The eldest of eight siblings in a low-middle-income household, McKnight said he benefited from free Catholic schooling in the Diocese of Wichita, Kansas.

Two of his uncles were physicians and Shawn aspired to be a doctor. He'd just taken the Medical College Admissions Test when he and other resident advisers at his Catholic college were invited to a retreat, which he saw as a chance to catch up on his homework — and his sleep.

But it was at that retreat that he got the first inkling of a call to the priesthood. In a van on the way back to college, he said he told himself, "You've got to get this out of your head. You've got a girlfriend waiting for you."

Instead, the top envelope in the stack of mail waiting for him at school was a letter from the Wichita Diocese's vocations director. It read, "Have you ever thought of becoming a priest?" Diocesan Catholics were asked to submit the names of young

men they thought would be good priests and drop them in the collection basket at Mass. His was one of those names, "and that started it," the archbishop-designate said.



Bishop Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Mo., speaks from the floor June 11, 2019, on the first day of the spring general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

McKnight was made a bishop in 2018. That summer, then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's sexual misdeeds were made public, followed by a scathing Pennsylvania grand jury report detailing clergy sex abuse in six of the state's eight dioceses.

One thing McKnight did once he took the helm in Jefferson City was have an outside firm review diocesan clergy files for any credible accusations of abuse by any priest — active, retired or dead. As the diocese was preparing its report, the Missouri attorney general's office came knocking, asking for the clergy files — and all was ready.

That fall, McKnight addressed his fellow bishops when they met in Baltimore, using a tone as brusque as had been heard in years in that forum. "I was thrown into that whole whirlwind, a maelstrom. I remember being very genuine with what I was thinking and what I was feeling," he remembered.

He urged the bishops to "use the full set of resources God has given his church ... including the charism of the laity," he added. "We're obligated to use the best and the brightest available to us. Just having a canon law degree doesn't necessarily make you the best."

Another issue he has dealt with is immigration, which has roiled the nation's breadbasket. In his opening remarks at the press conference announcing his new appointment, McKnight gave a greeting in Spanish that translates to: "The church should be for anyone who is in fear and who is in need."

"The fact of the matter is, the [immigration] system is broken," he said in an interview. "It's not fair to refugees or immigrants that they don't have an orderly process to enter this country. We have to advocate for solutions that are rooted in compassion and not rooted in harshness."