News



Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wisconsin, venerates relics of St. Maria Goretti at St. Maria Goretti Church in Madison in 2015. (CNS/Catholic Herald/Kevin Wondrash)



by Peter Feuerherd

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A social media petition campaign asking Pope Francis to remove Bishop Robert Morlino as leader of the Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin, has generated more than 7,300 signatures as of Nov. 9.

The campaign is a response to an advisory sent to priests by Fr. James Bartylla, diocesan vicar general, that discouraged Catholic funerals for those in same-sex marriages and relationships. The advisory was made public Oct. 22.

The advisory said that the surviving partner should have no role in such rites because of "the risk of scandal and confusion to others." It also said that obituaries noting a same-sex marriage or relationship should not include the name of the parish or the priest presider at a funeral.

In a response to Madison media, diocesan spokesman Brent King said that while Morlino did not write the advisory, he agreed with its contents. King also stated that the advisory was meant to be confidential, and that the leaking of the document was in violation of church protocols and that those who leaked it were guilty of calumny against Morlino. King did not respond to NCR inquiries.

The online petition urges Francis to remove Morlino, charging his lack of pastoral sensitivity. Francis has urged the church to be welcoming to all, including same-sex couples, while still upholding church teaching that homosexual activity is sinful.

The online petition is organized by Amelia Royko Maurer, who has been active in Democratic politics in Wisconsin, according to her LinkedIn profile.

Royko Mauer's petition takes issue with Morlino's opposition to same-sex marriage, who once ordered pastors to show a video urging Catholics to oppose a same-sex marriage initiative in Wisconsin.

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The petition says Morlino has had a "corrosive and corrupt influence over the Diocese through his transparent attempts to influence the voting habits of its members." It says that Morlino is a bigot whose attitudes toward the "LGBTQI [typically defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and intersex] members of his Diocese ... are nothing short of inhumane."

"His hatred and discrimination are undoubtedly a violation of Christ's admonition to love thy neighbor," it says.

The petition accuses Morlino of "hate-filled fixation on the intimate lives of consensual and committed adults. He tries to disguise this obsession under a veil of discrimination and deploys it at a time when loss leaves loved ones most vulnerable and in need of support."

"We started this petition with hopes of ending the unnecessary suffering of the LGBTQI Catholic community at the hands of Bishop Morlino with his obsessive sexualizing and punishing of them," Royko Mauer wrote in an email to NCR. "This is dark, ugly and inhumane behavior. It must end."

This flap is the latest controversial edict sent from Morlino for the diocese, which includes 270,000 Catholics spread over 11 southwest Wisconsin counties.

Previously, Morlino, who came to Madison in 2003, has urged his priests to celebrate Mass in Latin with their backs to the congregation and facing the East, as was done routinely before the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He has discouraged standing for Communion, a common practice in most U.S. dioceses, and has forbidden the distribution of eucharistic wine at Mass, stating the practice should be suspended until there is renewed liturgical respect.

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He forced the resignation of a lay pastoral worker after she declined to disavow her graduate school thesis, which Morlino said was opposed to the church's view of an all-male priesthood.

He suggested that the popular hymn "All Are Welcome" by Marty Haugen, a staple in many U.S. Catholic churches, is too lax on the church's stance toward public sinners.

A column he wrote soon before the 2016 election was widely seen as a thinly veiled endorsement of President Donald Trump, who carried Wisconsin, a pivotal electoral state.

The Wisconsin State Journal, the local daily, carried a letter to the editor from a recently confirmed high school senior who expressed outrage over Morlino's views,

contrasting them unfavorably with those of Francis.

"I think Pope Francis would be disgusted if he was aware of Bishop Morlino's actions," wrote Maddie Raffel of Madison.

She said the advisory sent to priests was "an act of hatred. Bishop Morlino's actions have turned me away from the church, and it will do the same for many young Catholics out there. This is not the way I want to be represented because this is not what I believe."

Joseph Hasler, an attorney and parishioner in Reedsburg, a part of the Madison Diocese, said that the controversy has been typical for Morlino, who, similar to Trump, likes to play to a traditionalist base.

"It was started by the bishop because he can't stay out of the culture wars," Hasler told NCR. He said the bishop's support for Trump, who in an infamous video released pre-election described a technique for assaulting women, later explained by the then-candidate as locker-room banter, is ironic because "the bishop doesn't want to have funeral rites for poor gay people because they have offended morality."

While the church universal has largely embraced the style of Francis, who has emphasized that Catholicism should be open to all, the Madison Diocese remains closed off, said Hasler.

"Morlino is doubling down and going in the opposite direction," Hasler said.

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Jim Green of Madison, a member of the Catholic LGBT group DignityUSA and a signer of the petition, said that the latest directive on funerals for Madison's Catholic LGBT community has brought out a unified opposition to Morlino that had been dormant for years.

"He went a step too far," said Green who, with his partner of 47 years owns a plot in a diocesan cemetery. Green said, "This is the final thing. They don't want to support us when we're alive and they don't want to bury us."

Jim Beyers*, also from Madison, is a former Call to Action member who, with that organization, tried to get Morlino removed years ago. He also signed the petition.

But he is not confident that Francis, or the pope's people in Rome, will act on the matter, as Morlino has survived previous challenges without even a formal response from the Vatican.

"There is a saying that a small group can change the world but I haven't seen that myself," he said.

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]

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**This story has been changed to correct the spelling of a name.*

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