News



Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki in Rome in 2010 (CNS/Paul Haring)



by James Dearie

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This story was updated at 2:30 p.m. CDT with quotes from a statement by the Racine Dominicans.

A retreat for gay priests, brothers and deacons in Wisconsin scheduled to take place for the fourth year in a row is coming under fire from conservative Catholic media and the local archbishop.

"Living in Truth: The Call to Authenticity" is planned Oct. 2-4 at the Siena Retreat Center in Racine, in the Milwaukee Archdiocese*. It is sponsored by New Ways Ministry, and Fordham professor of theology Fr. Bryan Massingale is slated as the retreat leader.

The retreat became a matter of controversy in early August, when articles began appearing in conservative Catholic media criticizing the retreat and calling on Catholics to contact Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki about it.

In an August 9 letter to parishes in the diocese also posted online, Listecki said that "With so many inquiring if this retreat is directly connected to the Archdiocese, which it is not, I felt obligated to clarify. …This event is not in line with Catholic Church teaching and is in no way connected to or endorsed by the archdiocese, and New Ways Ministry is not a Catholic organization."

New Ways Ministry executive director Francis DeBernardo told NCR that the bishop's letter was the first time the diocese had expressed an objection to the retreat, now in its fourth year.

In his letter, Listecki recommended an article about the retreat by Fr. Nathan Reesman hosted on the archdiocese's website. In the article, Reesman, the archdiocese's chaplain for Courage and EnCourage, organizations that promote abstinence among Catholic LGBT people, says that "More often than not, a man or woman who chooses to define himself or herself as 'gay' is doing so because they believe their same-sex inclination is their defining attribute, and this belief allows them to live a lifestyle that normalizes same-sex relationships, either on a merely emotional level or also on the physical level."

Reesman also said that holding the retreat now, as "we are living through the horror of frequent headlines about the deviant behaviors by male clergy with younger men

or boys, was "very poor timing."

"In such a delicate climate, one wonders why any extra attention should be drawn to the reality of same sex attraction in the Catholic clergy under such an ambiguous title as this upcoming retreat for 'gay' priests," he said.

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New Ways Ministry responded to the bishop's letter with a statement Aug. 17, saying one of the "primary goals" of such retreats is "to help men who have made a promise or vow of celibacy to live out that commitment in healthy and holy ways. Few programs such as these exist in our church. We encourage church leaders to provide programs to help these men avoid frustrated lives, deal with their sexual feelings in a healthy way, and integrate their sexuality with their spirituality."

The group also took issue with Reesman's characterization of LGBT identity.

"The term 'gay' does not mean that individuals make their sexual orientation the dominant marker of themselves, any more than calling someone Italian or Polish makes that attribute the dominant marker of the individual," New Ways Ministry said.

"The retreat participants have often reported that their primary identity marker is as a member and minister of the Catholic Church," the group added, asking given the information that had been made public on the event, what "led the Archbishop to conclude that the retreat 'is not in line with Catholic Church teaching'?"

"The part not in line with Catholic teaching would be the part sponsored by New Ways Ministry, as clearly articulated by His Eminence Francis Cardinal George (May he rest in peace)," Jerry Topczewski, Listecki's chief of staff told NCR, referencing a document by the Chicago archbishop when he was president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2010, which said, "… New Ways Ministry has no approval or recognition from the Catholic Church and that they cannot speak on behalf of the Catholic faithful in the United States."

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Massingale, a Milwaukee Archdiocese priest since his ordination in 1983 who disputes the characterization of the retreat as being at odds with Catholic teaching, issued his own statement on the matter, published today on NCR.

Fr. Fred Daly, a priest of the Syracuse Diocese who attended a retreat by New Ways Ministry last year, told NCR that he found the retreat to be a time of contemplation and prayer shared between priests facing many of the same issues. "What could the objection be to that?" he said.

Listecki said in his statement that he cannot stop the retreat, but there is still an effort to force its cancellation. An email from Men of Christ Aug. 21 said that the retreat "implicitly endors[ed] mortal sin," while "that very mortal sin is 'wreaking great devastation in the vineyard of the Lord,' " quoting from a letter by Bishop Robert Morlino released last week that blamed a "homosexual subculture" for the abuse scandal in the church. The email encouraged readers to contact the Siena Retreat Center to request that the retreat be cancelled.

Nevertheless, the retreat is set to go forward, and DeBernardo says the group will "definitely" continue to put on similar events in the future.

"Each year that we've done [the retreats], as the word spreads, more and more priests, brothers and deacons register. So there really is need for gay priests to develop their spirituality, and develop friendships with one another, mainly because of so much negative messaging they receive from the Vatican, from members of the hierarchy, or even Catholics in the pews."

In a statement emailed to NCR, the Racine Dominicans said that "All are welcome" at the retreat center "as long as their purpose is not contrary to the uplifting mission and vision of the retreat center... A retreat that supports gay priests, deacons and brothers to live authentically the vocation to which they have been called aligns well with the mission and philosophy of the retreat center, which is to nurture a healing and holistic spirituality in an environment of joy, peace, and beauty."

Related: Bishop Morlino, others charge 'homosexual subculture' for clergy abuse crisis

"New Ways Ministry invites Archbishop Listecki to dialogue with us and with the gay priests who live and serve in his Archdiocese," New Ways Ministry's statement says

at its conclusion, "so that he can learn more about the pressures these men experience and about the blessings that they bring to the community through their priesthood."

[James Dearie is an NCR Bertelsen intern. Contact him at jdearie@ncronline.org]

**This story has been corrected to reflect that the retreat is taking place at the Siena Retreat Center,which is owned by the Racine Dominicans, but is not sponsored by either the center or the Racine Dominicans.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 7-20, 2018** print issue under the headline: Retreat for gay priests, brothers, deacons under fire.