News



Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., pictured in an undated photo, died Nov. 24 at SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital in Madison. (CNS/Diocese of Madison)

by Catholic News Service

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Updated 11:35 a.m. Central time Nov. 27, 2018 with additional details and reaction.

Bishop Robert Morlino, the fourth bishop of Madison, died Nov. 24 at St. Mary's Hospital in Madison. He was 71.

The bishop was undergoing planned medical tests when he suffered what doctors described as "a cardiac event" at the hospital and he never recovered.

On Nov. 26, the diocesan College of Consultors unanimously elected Msgr. James Bartylla, vicar general, to be administrator of the diocese until a successor to Morlino is appointed.

Funeral arrangements include a prayer vigil and time for visitation Dec. 3 at the O'Donnell Chapel at Holy Name Heights in Madison. The vigil and visitation will be 1 p.m. to 7 p.m., followed by vespers. Bishop Paul Swain of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, will preside. Swain was ordained a priest for the Madison Diocese.

The funeral Mass for Morlino will be celebrated Dec. 4 at St. Maria Goretti Church in Madison, followed by interment at Resurrection Cemetery. The main celebrant of the Mass will be Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki with Bartylla as homilist. There will be visitation from 9 a.m. until the 11 a.m. funeral Mass.

In a statement about the bishop's death, the diocese said that "all objective indicators point to the fact that Bishop Morlino accomplished what he set out to do in the diocese" after his Aug. 1, 2003, installation.

Among his "three expressed priorities" was increasing "the number and quality of the men ordained to the diocesan priesthood," it said. "Fostering greater priestly vocations" resulted in his ordination of 40 men to the priesthood during his tenure. Another 24 are currently in formation.

Morlino also aimed "to instill a greater sense of reverence throughout the entire diocese, especially through our worship of God, celebrated in the holy sacrifice of the Mass," the diocese said, "and to challenge Catholic institutions in the diocese to live out their professed faith in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, through their ministry in the secular community."

He succeeded in "bringing a greater sense of reverent worship to the entire diocese, and he made significant inroads toward encouraging the Catholic institutions in his care to live out their mission with greater fidelity, during his 15-plus years as bishop of Madison," the diocese said. "We pray this continues."

Born Dec. 31, 1946, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Robert Charles Morlino was an only child. His father, Charles, died while he was in high school; his mother, Albertina, died in 1980. He was raised in Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania, graduating from the Jesuit-run Scranton Preparatory High School.

He entered the seminary for the Maryland province of the Society of Jesus and was ordained to the priesthood for that province June 1, 1974. His education included a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Fordham University, a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame, and a master of divinity degree from the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He also had a doctorate in moral theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, with a specialization in fundamental moral theology and bioethics.

Morlino taught philosophy at Loyola College in Baltimore, St. Joseph University in Philadelphia, Boston College, and the University of Notre Dame and St. Mary's College in Indiana. He also served as an instructor in continuing education for priests, religious and laity and as director of parish renewal programs

In 1981, Morlino became a priest of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan, and served there as vicar for spiritual development, executive assistant and theological consultant to the bishop, as moderator of the curia and as the promoter of justice in the diocesan tribunal. He was administrator of a number of parishes, and later rector of St. Augustine Cathedral in Kalamazoo.

Morlino was scheduled to begin a full-time faculty appointment as professor of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit when, on July 6, 1999, St. John Paul II appointed him the ninth bishop of Helena, Montana.

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Morlino was named fourth bishop of Madison May 23, 2003, and installed about three months later.

On the national level, Morlino is a past chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Diaconate and its Ad Hoc Committee on Health Care Issues and the Church.

He also served on the Bishops and Presidents Subcommittee of the USCCB's Committee on Education, which focuses on the Catholic identity of institutions of higher education. Morlino also was a past chairman of the board of directors of the Philadelphia-based National Catholic Bioethics Center, which conducts research, consultation, publishing and education to promote human dignity in health care and the life sciences.

Morlino also was chairman of the board of visitors for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. This board was a federal advisory committee created by congress to maintain independent review, observation and recommendation regarding operations of the institute, located at Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia.

Run by the U.S. Department of Defense, the institute is an education and training facility for civilian, military and law enforcement personnel from Western Hemisphere countries. For his service to the United States and his promotion of human rights education, the bishop was honored by the Department of the Army in 2009.

In 2006, the national Alliance for Marriage joined with the Congress of Racial Equality to present Morlino with their Lifetime Achievement Award, for his promotion of the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

In 2008, for his work in defense of the dignity of the human person, Morlino was awarded Human Life International's Cardinal von Galen Award, named after the famous German bishop who worked actively against the Nazis. That same year, he also received the St. Edmund's Medal of Honor, awarded to Catholics "who have used their God-given talents in promoting the common good."

In 2015, he was the recipient of Relevant Radio's Christ Brings Hope Award and earlier this year, he received the St. Thomas Aquinas College Medallion.

Reaction to Morlino's death included a statement from Judie Brown, president of American Life League. She called him courageous and "one of the most heroic bishops of our time," noting he took a stand against the morning-after abortion pill,

when "his brother bishops in Wisconsin," according to Brown, "embraced" neutrality on the issue. She also praised his ongoing support of the encyclical "Humanae Vitae."

"This shepherd defended truth with immense confidence in God and his truth," Brown added.

Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis in a Nov. 25 statement called Morlino a "selfless shepherd."

"As a seminarian and young priest, I was inspired by his love of Christ and his church," he said. "An ardent promoter of vocations, he had a real gift for communicating the truths of our faith to young hearts. I will miss him as a friend and colleague. May he now rest in the loving embrace of the God he served so well."