Culture
News



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A popular traditionalist priest who performed live-streamed exorcisms falsely alleging widespread election fraud will no longer serve in ministry in the Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin.

A statement sent to the priests of the diocese on Jan. 14 said Fr. John Zuhlsdorf will relocate to "pursue other opportunities" and noted it was a mutual decision reached between Zuhlsdorf and Madison's Bishop Donald Hying.

The statement also said that Zuhlsdorf, who has served in the diocese since 2014, remains in "good canonical standing."

"The Bishop of Madison is grateful to the Reverend Zuhlsdorf for his faithful support of the diocese's seminarians and priests, thanks him for his many years of steadfast ministry serving the diocese, and wishes him the best in his future endeavors," the email stated.

The controversial right-wing priest also announced the move on his own website, Fr. Z's Blog, noting that he made the decision to leave the diocese after reflecting on his 10-year plan.

"The *near* future right now looks pretty grim, in the secular realm and in the Church. The battle is coming. Trotsky said that you might not be interested in war, but war is interested in you," he wrote on Jan. 15. Although he did not specify his next steps, he did note that he intends to continue his blog.

Despite his note that his departure comes on his own terms, it occurs one week after Zuhlsdorf has come under fire in the pages of both The Tablet and America magazine for practicing exorcisms without the permission of his bishop.

Although Zuhlsdorf initially defended himself saying he received permission from the bishop, the bishop publicly corrected him, issuing a statement to clarify that his permission for the exorcism rite was "for the intention of alleviation from the scourge of the coronavirus pandemic" and not for "partisan political activity."

Zuhlsdorf is a priest of the Italian Diocese of Velletri-Segni, near Rome. Earlier this month, The Tablet published an excerpt from a letter by Bishop Vincenzo Apicella saying that Zuhlsdorf's activities were the responsibility of Hying.*

"We certainly cannot verify and evaluate from Velletri what is said, written and published in Wisconsin, apart from the fact that, personally, I have never used or contacted any blog or such thing and I have no intention of starting now, given that unfortunately, I belong to a non-digital generation," Apicella said.*

Yet he did not mince words in his assessment of Zuhlsdorf's activities.

"On the other hand, one who combines arguments of faith and morals with photos of birds, Chinese food and aircraft seats, as well as boasting about a firearms license, speaks for itself and I do not see what theological or scientific credibility he can have," he added.

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Zuhlsdorf, a staunch adherent to the Latin Mass, is a regular celebrant at St. Mary of Pine Bluff where, as NCR reported in June 2020, the pastor, Fr. Richard Heilman, actively promoted a letter by the disgraced former papal nuncio to the U.S., Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, in support of President Donald Trump.

On his blog, along with his regular reflections on traditional liturgy, Zuhlsdorf has been an ardent critic of Pope Francis and been sympathetic to much of Trump's agenda.

In 2017, he helped spearhead an effort among fringe right-wing websites that led to the cancellation of a talk by Fr. James Martin at Theological College at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Although Martin's talk was on "Encountering Jesus: Meeting the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith," Zuhlsdorf ire was directed at Martin due to his new book on LGBT Catholics.

In addition to his rogue online activities, in 2014, Zuhlsdorf urged his followers to disrupt* a talk at Hofstra University on Long Island, New York, resulting in campus officials informing him that any future presence at the university would require written authorization.

Despite his own efforts to silence those with whom he disagrees, in his blog post announcing his departure from Madison, Zuhlsdorf warned of a "cancel culture" among Catholics.

"There is a catholic Antifa now. They are feeling their ascendancy and they are applying it. We will see more persecution leveled at any one who strays from their demands. ... They are bullies. They are easy to spot. They aren't even trying to hide it anymore," he wrote. "In the near future they will be a force of great evil in the Church and we must find ways to resist them without stooping to their thuggery, without giving in to hate. God help them."

Without having priestly faculties in the Madison Diocese, according to the church's Code of Canon Law, he will now need to receive the permission of another bishop to continue his work elsewhere.

**This article has been edited to correct the source of Apicella's quotes in The Tablet and to clarify who disrupted the talk.*