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Bishop James P. Powers of Superior, Wis., pictured in a 2016 photo, said in a statement April 5, 2024, that Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former papal nuncio to the U.S., has publicly defamed him by challenging the "sanctity" of the diocese's chrism Mass. Bishop Powers demanded the prelate issue a public apology "to me and my people." (OSV News/CNS file, Sam Lucero, The Compass)

by OSV News

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A northern Wisconsin bishop accused Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganó, former apostolic nuncio to the U.S., of defamation, while seeking clarification of an allegedly illicit priest ordination that the archbishop might have conducted.

Bishop James P. Powers of Superior, Wisconsin, released a strongly worded statement April 5, responding to a March 22 post from the X (formerly Twitter) account of Archbishop Viganó, which sharply criticized a Native American ritual preceding this year's diocesan chrism Mass in March.

The ritual, which took place at the Cathedral of Christ the King March 19, had been the subject of controversy online. A video livestreaming the chrism Mass showed that before the Mass began, four Ojibwe women dressed in traditional garb and holding feathers did a choreographed dance in the sanctuary, accompanied by the playing of a drum, before a prayer to God, the Creator, during which the women faced east, south, west and north.

In an X post, Viganó called the ritual a "shamanic ceremony" and "a sacrilegious act that desecrates the Cathedral of the diocese of Superior." He also accused Powers of being responsible for a "very serious sacrilege," saying that the bishop was "a squalid official of the ecumenical religion, a dutiful executor of Santa Marta's wishes," referring to the home of Pope Francis.

"This is not a Successor of the Apostles, but a servant of Freemasonry," the archbishop said, adding that "to see that the participants in the profanations of the Bergoglian sect are almost all of advanced age" was "comforting."

In his April 5 statement, Powers rebuked the archbishop's post, countering that the Diocese of Superior has a long-standing tradition "to honor the heritage of our Native Americans before major diocesan celebrations."

He also said that "this tradition was carried out at my own installation as Bishop of Superior" in February 2016, adding that Viganó was present as apostolic nuncio and never expressed concerns about it.

"I would have at least expected the courtesy of a prior contact before any alleged public accusations of promoting Shamanism," said the bishop, who also said that the message posted from the archbishop's social media account was a violation of his canonical right to a good name and reputation. He added that "to refer to me as a 'servant of freemasonry' and challenge my authenticity as a Successor of the Apostles is especially egregious" and that "this kind of rhetoric brings harm to the faithful entrusted to my care."

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"This kind of public defamation does not befit an Archbishop of the Catholic Church," Powers said. Addressing the archbishop in his statement, he said, "If this is true that you in fact reported the above inflammatory statements about me. I would expect a public apology from you to me and my people."

Viganó, who served as apostolic nuncio to the United States from 2011 to 2016, has increasingly been associated with ultra-traditionalist factions within the Catholic Church. In 2018, he published a testimony calling on Pope Francis to resign, claiming the pope knew about the former cardinal Theodre McCarrick's sexual misconduct and yet eased restrictions on McCarrick's ministry and travel. He also expressed solidarity with then-president Donald Trump in 2020, suggesting that the "deep state" was responsible for orchestrating the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarded by some as a provocateur, the archbishop has released multiple public statements targeting church leaders and has been an outspoken critic of Francis.

In his statement, the Superior bishop also sought clarification from Viganó for "his allegedly ordaining" Bryan Walman, who is known as Father Ambrose and sending him and Rebekah Siegler, known as Sister Tecla, to the Diocese of Superior "to operate without episcopal approval."

According to Catholic outlet The Pillar, in late 2023, Viganó announced he would found a seminary where people would not have to accept the "heresies of the Second Vatican Council or the deviations of Bergoglio," and it would welcome clerics "who have been deprived of their parish or removed from their community because they are not compatible with the doctrinal, moral and spiritual approach of the Bergoglian Church."

In February, Powers wrote a letter warning his diocese about the "questionable canonical status of Bryan Walman and Rebekah Siegler," and the Hermitage of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Cumberland, Wisconsin. The hermitage's website states that they "adhere to the pre-conciliar teachings and Sacramental life of the Catholic and Apostolic Faith, and live out the mission of propagating its timeless saving truths."

The Wisconsin bishop cautioned the faithful who were becoming attracted to the hermitage, saying that the secrecy surrounding the activities of Walman and Siegler took time to investigate. Powers noted that the diocese's vicar general and judicial vicar tried to meet with Walman and Siegler to determine their canonical status and that they told Walman that without proof of their canonical status, there was no way to verify the validity of the sacraments he was celebrating.

Powers told his faithful that it is incumbent upon a priest "to present the bishop of any Diocese with formal documentation proving his canonical status as a priest. This documentation proves the individual is a priest in good standing with an appropriate background check, and also proves that they have the permission of their Bishop to minister in another diocese." Neither Walman nor Siegler were willing to supply proper documentation, the bishop said.

Because a priest cannot celebrate valid sacraments without the local bishop's permission, Powers wrote, "If sacraments are currently being offered at this location (the Hermitage) by Bryan Walman, they are not valid or lawful in the Roman Catholic Church."

Canon 265 states that every cleric must be incardinated in a particular church (a diocese or its equivalent in law) or a personal prelature, institute of consecrated life, or society. "Accordingly, acephalous or 'wandering' clergy are by no means allowed."

According to The Pillar, the church prohibits bishops from conferring sacred ordination "unless they are ordaining clerics to be incardinated in their own dioceses, or possess the proper documentation to confirm that an ordained person will be incardinated" in a diocese or other ecclesiastical structure and doing so "without proper documentation can be subject to canonical sanctions."

In his February letter, Powers also said that "any woman claiming to be a religious sister must have obedience to a legitimate religious superior and prove she is in good standing when she enters a diocese," which Siegler did not do. He added that

he heard Siegler claim to be a "Consecrated Virgin," but the bishop questioned the use of the name sister (Siter Tecla) and her wearing a religious habit. He added that Siegler does not have his permission to be in the diocese.

The bishop cautioned people in the diocese about attending services at the hermitage and supporting it financially, adding that he was willing to reevaluate the situation if Siegler and Walman could provide proper documentation.

"Without proof of a valid ordination to the priesthood, Bryan Wallman is putting the spiritual lives of some of my people in danger," Powers said in his April 5 statement.

By establishing a "Hermitage" within the Diocese of Superior without the bishop's approval, he continued, "these individuals give further veneer of authenticity to their actions."

"If Archbishop Vigano is involved in any way with these activities, I demand that he cause their cessation immediately," the bishop concluded.

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