News



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., speaks during the July 20, 2024, revival night of the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis. Barron is scheduled to receive the Josef Pieper Prize in Germany July 27, 2025. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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It is not often that an American bishop makes headlines in Germany.

For weeks, Catholic institutions and associations in Germany have been vocal in criticizing Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. The bishop, who is founder of the Catholic media company Word on Fire, is scheduled to receive the prestigious Josef Pieper Prize in the city of Münster on July 27. While some have announced protests, others have welcomed this controversial invitation.

"Bishop Barron stands for a kind of Catholicism that excludes people like LGBTQ Catholics or migrants," said a statement by the Catholic Faculty of Münster University that was published weeks ago and garnered a lot of attention in Germany. For a number of prominent professors, the award ceremony shows an apparent recognition and promotion of a kind of faith that is part of a worldwide movement using theology "to support authoritarianism in the U.S., Europe and other places."

Protests are planned near the academy Franz Hitze Haus, where Barron will receive his award. The faculty members displeased with the decision said they saw a conflict with the bishop's views and the values of the Catholic Church.

The Josef Pieper Foundation and the academy have stuck with their plan, refusing calls to disinvite the bishop or even to cancel the whole symposium where he is supposed to speak.

The National Catholic Reporter reached out to Barron's communications representatives July 24 for a reaction but did not get a reply.

The Josef Pieper Prize was established more than 20 years ago, in 2004, in memory of an influential Catholic philosopher from Münster. Pieper is renowned especially in scientific and theological circles.

Since then, the prize has been given to scholars who are especially active in promoting the Christian view of humanity with their science, such as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and French historian Rémi Brague.

The award has been given to people across the political spectrum. The last recognition, in 2019, went to Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, a prominent critic of Germany's "Synodal Path" reform project and an advocate of Pope Benedict XVI's

teachings.

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The award committee said Barron was being recognized for his efforts in evangelization through modern media. With his Word on Fire ministries, the committee said, the bishop is spreading Catholic messages by modern means "like no other," through books, videos and podcasts.

Johannes Sabel, director of Franz Hitze Haus, called the award a step to further democratic discourse, even with people most Catholics in Germany don't agree with. "Our academy is a place of plurality, discourse and even constructive dispute. … A conservative theological or political point of view should not be a reason to deny this debate."

Sabel wrote in a commentary published in the Münster Diocese's newspaper, Kirche+Leben, that he welcomes protests and criticism as a sign of a functioning democratic society. He said many people congratulated the academy for its choice as well, as Barron had contributed extensively to scientific and theological discourse.

For Sebastian Ostritsch of the conservative Catholic newspaper Die Tagespost, Barron is a "gifted teacher and intellectual," deeply connected to Pieper's work. "He once was asked for recommendations of entry-level philosophy books, and he suggested several works by Pieper. So it makes very much sense to grant him the Josef Pieper Prize," Ostritsch said.

That same reasoning was reflected by the prize committee. Berthold Wald, head of the award committee, wrote on the foundation's website: "None of our former award winners has been connected to Pieper's work so closely."

Yet critics in Münster and beyond are growing louder by the day. Several groups have announced a quiet vigil in front of the Überwasserkirche, the church where Barron will celebrate Mass on Sunday. Expected protesters include local chapters of the German Catholic Youth Federation, the Catholic Women's Society, Catholic queer advocates, and the local chapter of the Green Party.

Concerns are being voiced from inside as well, including from Thomas Sternberg, one of the three founders of the Josef Pieper Prize, former director of Franz Hitze

Haus, and former president of the Central Committee of German Catholics, a national lay group.

Pieper symbolizes the free spirit of theological discourse, Sternberg told Kirche+Leben. He expressed concern about whether his former foundation can keep that same spirit alive after awarding Barron this honor.

As Sternberg put it: "Pieper never fit in any boxes. That's why his memory shouldn't be exploited — no matter from which political side."