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Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., third from left, prays the rosary with s

Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., third from left, prays the rosary with students at the University of Notre Dame at the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes Feb. 24, two weeks after calling on the university of Notre Dame to withdraw its appointment of Susan Ostermann as director of the school's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies. (OSV News/Gretchen Crowe)

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A professor at the University of Notre Dame has declined a research appointment at the school, following weeks of outcry from students, staff and several U.S. Catholic bishops, over writings supporting abortion rights.

Susan Ostermann, associate professor in the Keough School of Global Affairs, has "decided not to move forward" as director of that school's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, said Keough Dean Mary Gallagher in a Feb. 26 email.

Ostermann — who specializes in the study of regulatory compliance, comparative politics and environmental regulation, with a focus on South Asia — will remain a member of the Keogh School's faculty.

The development was announced Feb. 26 by The Observer, the independent student newspaper of Notre Dame, St. Mary's College and Holy Cross College.

Gallagher said she was "grateful" for Ostermann's "willingness to serve and for the thoughtfulness with which she approached this decision."

Ostermann's appointment, announced Jan. 8, was set to take effect July 1, and quickly drew fire from Notre Dame faculty and staff. She had previously worked as a consultant for the Population Council, an international research and policy firm that works to advance "sexual and reproductive health, rights and choices" as a key aim.

At least two Notre Dame faculty members, professor Diane Desierto and emeritus professor Robert Gimello, resigned their roles at the Liu Institute in protest, according to The Observer.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, whose diocese includes the university, had issued a statement Feb. 11 expressing "dismay" and "strong opposition" to the university's decision, which he said was "causing scandal to the faithful of our diocese and beyond."

Ostermann's "extensive public advocacy of abortion rights and her disparaging and inflammatory remarks about those who uphold the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death go against a core principle of justice that is central to Notre Dame's Catholic identity and mission," Rhoades said, noting he had read many of the opinion pieces in which Ostermann had articulated her defense of abortion.

OSV News reached out to Rhoades and is awaiting a response.

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Two days before Ostermann's withdrawal, Rhoades joined some 50 students, faculty and staff gathered at the university's Marian grotto to "pray together for the cause of life and respect for all human life."

He said, "We pray for the University of Notre Dame, and we ask for the powerful intercession of our Blessed Mother as she looks over this campus."

Notre Dame sophomore Luke Woodyard, one of the prayer gathering's organizers, told OSV News the Ostermann appointment was "the straw that broke the camel's back."

"It's part of a long line of university action that's just unacceptable," he said. "So in the spirit of love and charity to our university, we want to come together as students and show that this is our voice, this is what we want."

"Notre Dame loves to talk about their Catholic identity, their broad, vague feel-good term, but what does that actually mean, and how do we put that into action?" he said.

Woodyard said a planned student-led protest, the March on the Dome, is still moving forward for Feb. 27 at 6 p.m.

The University of Notre Dame said that Ostermann was chosen to head the Liu Institute "for her expertise in Asian studies," and that "she respects the University's position on the sanctity of life, and that as director, she understands her role is to support the diverse research of the Institute's scholars and students, not advance a personal political agenda."

In a statement included with Gallagher's Feb. 26 email announcing her withdrawal, Ostermann said her "only goal" in accepting the Liu directorship "was to serve as a steward for the Institute's world-class faculty, students and staff." Ostermann said she had not applied for the position, but was "truly honored to take on" the role.

"At present, the focus on my appointment risks overshadowing the vital work the Institute performs, which it should be allowed to pursue without undue distraction," said Ostermann. "At the same time, it has become clear that there is work to do at Notre Dame to build a community where a variety of voices can flourish. Both academic inquiry and the full realization of human dignity demand this of us."

Holy Cross Father Wilson Miscamble, emeritus professor of history at Notre Dame, told OSV News he was "deeply pleased" by Ostermann's decision to decline the Liu appointment, but added, "I recognize there is much work to do to uphold Notre Dame's Catholic mission and identity."

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