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Wisconsin parish worker fired for feminist views

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Kolpack receives blessings from parishioners (Photos by James Andrews)

Madison, WI

Ruth Kolpack, pastoral associate since 1995 at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Beloit, Wis., was fired earlier this month after a brief meeting with Madison Bishop Robert Morlino.

No specific accusations supporting the dismissal have been publicly made. A news release issued by Kolpack supporters stated that over the past three years, Madison diocese officials received "several accusations" against Kolpack. It added that last January, Fr. Steve Kortendick, pastor of St. Thomas and St. Jude parishes in Beloit, met with Morlino about those accusations. Since then, the release said, Kortendick and the diocesan chancellor, Kevin Phelan, had met in an unsuccessful effort to find a "positive resolution."

According to the release, the investigation shifted to a thesis Kolpack had written for her master of divinity degree that was granted from St. Francis seminary.

The thesis, written in 2003, evidently stirred little or no interest from church leaders until lately. Kolpack's main theme is on inclusiveness, and what she sees as a patriarchal tone in the church's liturgy, with an implicit exclusion of women from key roles, such as the priesthood.

**'Free God language from captivity' fired parish worker's thesis states
Kolpack letter to her parishioners explaining her dismissal
Bishop Morlino noted for orthodoxy, controversy**

Brent M. King, director of communications of the Diocese of Madison Mar. 17, in response to an *NCR* query, issued a statement. It said, in part that, "It is out of respect for the dignity and good reputation of every person involved, in this and all personnel matters, that specifics cannot and will not be discussed. You can be assured that the canonical and civil rights of each individual have been upheld absolutely. The Church takes this very seriously. I cannot make statements regarding Ms. Kolpack, as they could injure her good reputation."

The statement went on to say that church personnel "must uphold the faith and morals of the church" ... through what they publicly teach and claim to believe, what they associate themselves with, and by their



actions."

Kolpack said that when she met with her bishop she was given no opportunity to defend herself, nor did she have a chance to face or respond to those who had accused her.

When she met with Morlino, he stated that her views on the teachings of Jesus were "off base," according to Kolpack. She also said he informed her that he had not read her thesis in its entirety, only "bits and pieces."

She said that during the meeting he asked her to denounce the thesis, make a profession of faith, and take an oath of loyalty in order to remain as a pastoral associate at the parish.

She said she could profess her faith and take an oath, but could not refute the thesis in good conscience, that to do so would risk her reputation as a scholar.

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After Bishop Morlino's announcement, I was given no opportunity to discuss any points in my thesis with which we disagreed, nor any of the original accusations made against me," said Kolpack. "In fact, within 10 minutes from the beginning of our meeting, I was fired."

The following Saturday protests were held outside of a Janesville parish where Morlino was meeting. He spoke with the protesters, but declined to give any details of his reasons for firing Kolpack. All he would

say was that the action was a 'personnel matter' and that the thesis wasn't the only issue; that a 'certain mentality' on Kolpack's part was 'troublesome.' He stressed that he respects her good work at St. Thomas and didn't want to 'hurt her good name.'

Asked if there was a chance he'd reconsider Kolpack's firing, the bishop replied, 'You never say never, but it would be wrong of me to raise hopes in that regard.'



Kolpack told NCR that one good thing that came out of

Saturday's rally in Janesville: Morlino said he would come to Beloit and talk to the St. Thomas parishioners. 'But if he cannot divulge any information because it's a personnel matter,' Kolpack asked, '(How) will we ever find out? I don't know.'

After communion at Sunday's Mass, Kortendick spoke briefly to the congregation and then allowed Kolpack to speak. Within minutes many were in tears. Some gathered in a prayer huddle to offer their prayers and blessings. She had served the community for over thirty years.

'Parishioners are very devastated,' she told *NCR*. 'Sunday was a very bad time. I had people coming up to me after mass crying, hugging, and expressing concern. The big question is, 'why was I fired?'' Unfortunately, I can't answer it. People are going to think that if a bishop fires me, then it must be major. But I don't even know why I got fired. I can't tell parishioners why I got fired.'

Stephanie King Norton, a parishioner for 42 years, echoed the sentiments of many when she said she was 'shocked' by the dismissal.

'Ruth played more than just a role there. She was the foundation of all activity at St. Thomas. Ruth even told me she wanted to retire in about five years, but in reviewing her responsibilities, it became clear that they could never find someone that would take on as much responsibility that Ruth has. I don't know anyone at St. Thomas who would say that Ruth isn't the foundation, even if they don't always agree with her.'

'She's been through four priests, and we always knew she would be there. She's the heart and soul behind everything that goes on. Our priest is only 40 percent, so she was responsible for sacramental work as well. People converted and were brought back to the Catholic faith were crying because their friend was dismissed. Five- and six-year-olds were crying because they lost their teacher.'

Kolpack became a volunteer catechist at St. Thomas in 1971. She attended workshops and conferences to be certified in religious education. In 1983, she was hired as a part-time youth minister and organized a youth ministry program at St. Thomas. She took training at Loyola University, got a bachelor's degree in 1986 and was hired full-time. She later attended graduate school and earned a master's degree. Kolpack got involved in diocesan educational programs, did training work and had a leading role in establishing

the "Hands of Faith" program in which several churches take turns housing homeless families. She also had a part in establishing a Hispanic Ministry for Beloit's three Catholic parishes - St. Thomas, St. Jude and Our Lady of the Assumption.

Kolpack wrote a letter to Morlino in which she wrote, "My ministry is my life's work," concluding by asking him to reconsider her dismissal.

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