

Madison's Morlino noted for orthodoxy, controversy

Thomas C. Fox NCR Staff | Mar. 18, 2009



Bishop Morlino (CNS photo)

Madison Bishop Robert Morlino's dismissal of a pastoral associate in a Beloit, Wis., parish for alleged breaches of orthodoxy might have surprised some, but not local Catholics who know their bishop's mind and are familiar with actions he has taken in his five years in the diocese.

Ruth Kolpack was let go from her post at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, one that she held since 1995, after meeting with Morlino for 10 minutes earlier this month. During that meeting he asked her for an oath of loyalty and to denounce a scholarly thesis, supportive of women's rights in the church, that she had written in 2003.

She agreed to the former, refused the latter -- and she was out of a job.

The bishop's action has touched off a firestorm of protest inside and outside the diocese, which refuses to offer specifics for the dismissal, citing the need to respect Kolpack's privacy.

Brent M. King, director of communications for the diocese, in response to an NCR query, issued a statement March 17, saying that it is "out of respect for the dignity and good reputation of every person involved" that specifics cannot be discussed.

[Kolpack letter to her parishioners explaining her dismissal](#)

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Kolpack's supporters have been more vocal. They say she has been gravely mistreated and they have formed protests and have written letters on her behalf.

They pieced together steps leading up to the dismissal, as they saw it. These included anonymous letters written to the bishop, a meeting she had with her pastor, Fr. Steve Kortendick, last January to discuss the complaints and a subsequent meeting with the diocesan chancellor, Kevin Phelan, which, they said, failed to achieve a



Kolpack has kept a low profile, but has said that during her 10-minute meeting with Morlino he informed her that her views on the teachings of Jesus were "off base." He spoke to her about a thesis paper she wrote in 2003 for a master in divinity degree, granted to her from a local seminary. According to Kolpack, the bishop said he had only read "bits and pieces" of the paper. He then asked her to reassert her loyalty and orthodoxy. She was willing to do this, she said. However, she explained she could not denounce her academic paper.

The thesis, according to Kolpack supporters, focused on the need for greater inclusiveness in the church and the problems an overly patriarchal structure posed for many, especially women.

The Madison diocese communications office statement issued March 17 reiterated that all church members are bound by Christian obedience "to what the sacred pastors, who represent Christ, declare as teachers of the faith." Truth must be taught, the statement said, "without compromise." It explained that church staff must uphold faith and morals in their "public actions, associations and teachings" and that any contrary to church doctrine "are at worst seriously scandalous, and at best very inappropriate."

Asserting, or reasserting, church orthodoxy has been a hallmark of the Morlino tenure as bishop in Madison. In the process he has been a polarizing figure, viewed by his critics as narrow-minded, unfair and overbearing, and by his supporters as a much needed leader who is bringing truth and orthodoxy back to the diocese.

Morlino, 62, is the fourth bishop of the Madison diocese. Previously he served as the bishop of the Helena, Mont., diocese, was a priest in the Kalamazoo, Mich., diocese and was once a member of the Jesuit order. He assumed leadership in Madison in August 2003 and within months was creating waves.

After six months he made a controversial statement that he had found in Madison "a high comfort level with virtually no public morality." Some were not pleased with that assessment. After being confronted with what many saw as an unfair generalization he backed off, saying he had misspoken, explaining that he had been speaking in a philosophical sense.

"That was a much misunderstood statement," he told a reporter. "I really did use the wrong word. Public morality is a technical term in philosophy. What it means is that people have common starting points for their moral reasonings. They have common ground, common presuppositions, like axioms in geometry. I don't think it's very controversial to say that in Madison there are no common starting points. That's all I meant to say."

Morlino has also stirred controversy with statements he has made concerning political issues and for his assessments of politicians, especially those with whom he disagrees.

Just before the November 2006 elections he required every parish in his diocese to hear a personally recorded message condemning capital punishment, gay marriage and embryonic stem-cell research. Dozens of parishioners walked out of Mass or stood with their backs to the altar when the message played. Others welcomed his muscular teaching of Catholic doctrine.

In a letter to priests -- leaked to the press at the time -- he said any signal of disagreement on their part "could have serious consequences."

Before the November election last year Morino singled out House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then vice-presidential candidate Sen. Joseph Biden for not upholding church teachings on abortion.

Morlino, who grew up in Biden's hometown of Scranton, Pa., criticized the fellow Catholic and U.S. senator from Delaware for what he called the "confusion" of Biden and Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi over the obligation of Catholics to oppose abortion.

"They're violating the separation between church and state by confusing people about what I have an obligation to teach. They're stepping on the pope's turf and mine," Morlino said at the time.

Morlino insisted his remarks were not intended to be political, that he was not criticizing Biden as a Democrat, but rather as a Catholic who didn't understand church teaching.

Morlino critics say such statements, intended to be political or not, are not evenhanded. They have said that while he was quick to call out Catholic politicians who he felt had deviated from church views regarding abortion, he has been slow to complain about Catholic politicians, including local state politicians, who were at odds with the church's teachings on preemptive war, poverty and the death penalty.

Asked once by a reporter if he felt he had polarized Catholics by denouncing gay marriage, he said he had no regrets.

"I had no intention of creating a stir. I really believe, honestly, that the stir was created when at least certain Catholics had the perception that some priests were not teaching clearly about marriage. ... The stir was out there. I had to respond to it, and I did, and I would do the same thing again. ... I really looked upon this as relieving certain priests of the responsibility to defend marriage if they felt that somehow there was going to be a certain discomfort about this at some level or another."

Meanwhile, Morlino serves as chairman of the board of visitors for the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas. He has denied any wrongdoing by this military school that for decades has trained military officers from Latin America. Former students from this school have been accused of thousands of political killings, including the assassination of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador.

Morlino told a local newspaper in November 2007: "I know for a fact there is no evidence to connect what the school teaches with any kind of atrocity."

Morino again sparked controversy last year when he was accused of demanding confidential information from a survey he commissioned and then for refusing to pay the survey firm for its services when it rejected his demands.

In an ongoing lawsuit made public last June, the Phoenix Fundraising Counsel charged that Morino, contrary to his pledge, sought the names as well as the comments of priests who had been interviewed. The survey concerned the feasibility of a major campaign to erect the new cathedral. The suit stated that the 6,000 parishioners and 83 priests who participated in the survey were assured by a letter from Morlino that "all responses will be considered confidential," so that everyone can "feel free to comment without fear of repercussion."

But John Richert, president of Phoenix, said in the suit that when the responses were turned over to the bishop he insisted on the disclosure of confidential data, including the names of specific priests who had expressed concerns or registered complaints about Bishop Morlino during the survey process.?

Richert refused. According to the suit, Morlino subsequently fired Phoenix and refused to pay some \$350,000 for the work the company had done.

In a rebuttal, the diocese denied that Morlino sought the names of priests who had been interviewed. It said Phoenix was fired because its recommendations showed a clear disregard for Morlino's instructions concerning where the new cathedral should be built and was responding to interests other than [those of] the diocese. The rebuttal claims the diocese has paid Phoenix \$120,000.

Since Madison's St. Raphael Cathedral was devastated by an arson fire in 2005, Morlino has been trying to garner support for a \$70 million fundraising campaign, most of the money to go for a new cathedral. But opposition to the campaign has been strong, and the bishop has put it on hold.

Some local Catholics became so frustrated by Morlino's leadership that they took out a \$3,500 full page open letter ad in a local paper to express their feelings. The letter accused Morlino of ignoring input of clergy and laypeople, causing a climate of fear among priests who are afraid to publicly disagree with their bishop for fear of reprisal; of firing an openly gay music director; of hiring of priests who ban female altar servers; and of the alienation of Catholics who disagree with church doctrine as Morlino expresses it.

"We need more compassion not dismissal," the letter said.

The diocese responded saying, "Certain groups, who claim to be Catholic, would assume postures which clearly are not in accord with the teachings of the church."

Morlino's fans are as passionate as his detractors.

Huan Hoang of Madison was quoted in a local newspaper as saying that he had been "a sleeper" Catholic until two years ago when he heard a Morlino homily. "He awakened my faith," Hoang said. "He needs to know that he's leading us to Jesus Christ, and at the end of the day, that's the only thing that's important."

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