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Academic study can move the church forward

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

The **firing of Ruth Kolpack** from St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Beloit, Wis., has caused an uproar within the Madison, Wis., diocese as well across the country. It is hard to pinpoint why Kolpack was terminated -- she herself doesn't even know the exact reason.

The diocese won't reveal information because they say it is a 'personnel issue' and that doing so could hurt Kolpack's character. It seems that not saying something also hurts Kolpack's character, because we, the church community, end up relying on speculation rather than truth in an age where the faithful crave more transparency from the hierarchy.

There are hints at reasons why she was fired. Perhaps it was because of some anonymous complaints filed with the diocese against Kolpack (the content of these complaints is unclear). It might also be because of a document that Kolpack wrote to complete **her master's of divinity degree** At St. Francis Seminary near Milwaukee back in 2003.

I was curious about the document that Kolpack wrote. I earned a master's of divinity from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, and the topic Kolpack wrote about (inclusive language) was a topic that was explored in several of the courses offered at the Jesuit school. I believe that most of the sources Kolpack cites in her document could also be found at the library of the Graduate Theology Union, of which the Jesuit School of Theology is a member. While St. Francis Seminary no longer serves as an academic seminary, the Jesuit School of Theology is a theologate in good standing. It passed a visit from the Vatican a few years ago with flying colors. Thus, it seems that any number of graduates from my school could risk termination in the Madison diocese if any wrote something disagreeable with Bishop Robert Morlino. I was interested in talking to a member of St. Francis Seminary faculty at the time Kolpack was a student there, so I called Fr. Stephen Lampe, now the pastor at St. Joseph Church in Grafton, Wis.

Lampe taught scripture at St. Francis Seminary from 1991 to 2005, which includes the years that Kolpack was a student there. He described the environment during this time as "ecumenical" (both non-Catholic students and faculty made up the school community), and many faculty were rooted in the spirit and teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Women were encouraged to participate. Lay students studied alongside those on the ordination track, took the same coursework, read the same materials, and took the same exams in order to earn their master's of divinity degrees.

Students had three options to complete their coursework and graduate: a) write a thesis/dissertation, which included taking a position on an issue, and then arguing this position; b) write a seminar paper on a specific topic, exploring an issue such as the spirituality of teaching; or c) complete a three-question exam with a three-member faculty board. Kolpack chose this third option. Lampe was not on Kolpack's exam board, but he took the time to describe the process to me.

A student would choose an issue, and then explore it using a bibliography covering different areas of theological studies provided by the faculty board. (Kolpack's exam indicates the areas she examined around inclusive language were scripture, systematic theology and moral theology.) A student would have three weeks to examine the issue (inclusive language, for example) in a certain area (scripture, for example), and then present this work to his or her faculty board. Using feedback from the board, the student would revise the document presented.

I asked Lampe if the purpose of this exam was to be a statement or manifesto of one's faith. He told me that the purpose of the examination was to determine whether a student could articulate the Catholic position on a particular issue, as well as intelligently articulate other positions on an issue (such as Jewish scholars, Protestant scholars, etc.). The faculty board was not trying to determine whether a student believed a certain thing, as that was not the point of the examination. Kolpack's three-person faculty board, which included a priest who now teaches at Marquette University in Milwaukee, passed her. They determined that she understood the Catholic position on inclusive language from three different areas, and that she was also conversant in other traditions. Thus, she was awarded her master's of divinity degree in 2003.

In the meeting a couple weeks ago between Bishop Morlino and Kolpack (Chancellor Kevin Phelan and Fr. Steven Kortendick, pastor at St. Thomas the Apostle, were also present), Kolpack was asked to recant or denounce her thesis, as well as give an oath of loyalty and a profession of faith. She said, she was willing to do the latter two, but could not do the first on the grounds that it would mean disowning the six years of hard work she put into earning her master's of divinity degree. Thus, Kolpack lost her job.

It doesn't seem like Morlino has done many favors for Kolpack in the past two weeks. Her life has become more complicated because she can no longer work in her home diocese, the only work she has known for decades now. The parishioners at St. Thomas the Apostle are distraught over losing their friend and spiritual guide -- "the foundation of parish life," as Ruth has been described by some.

Perhaps the only favor that Morlino has done for Ruth is to make her master's level examination the most widely read of its kind this year, perhaps of this decade. Maybe ever.

I would hope that all of us will continue to dialogue on how and what we study and write about at accredited Catholic institutions. Such study should be moving us forward as a church and not throwing up barriers that discouraging learning.

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