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Fired Wisconsin pastoral worker won't be reinstated

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

A fired Wisconsin pastoral associate has been notified that she will not be reinstated to her job and cannot serve in any leadership role, voluntary or otherwise, in her Beloit parish.

In 2003, Ruth Kolpack wrote a thesis for a master's degree in which she argued for more gender-inclusive language in Catholic liturgies. In March, after meeting with Kolpack briefly, Madison Bishop Robert Morlino asked her to denounce that paper. When she refused, he fired her.

Details on what precisely led to the dismissal have not been divulged. However, a statement on the Madison diocese's Web site explained that the bishop acted because he could not trust her to teach authentic Catholic doctrine.

Kolpack has been a member of St. Thomas parish in Beloit for 35 years and worked there for 26 years. Her termination upset many parishioners there.

Morlino later agreed to meet with parishioners. He listened to their pleas to reinstate Kolpack, but earlier this month the diocese said they would not make that move. They also have notified Kolpack that she cannot take on any other leadership roles in her parish. She was told, for example, that she can sing in the parish choir, but could not lead the choir.

"I am exploring my legal options," said Kolpack, "because I am just one of 30,000 other lay ministers in the United States who can be fired at a bishop or priest's whim without any recourse. I have to take a stand not only for myself but for my fellow lay ministers who do not have any workplace protections."

"There is a long history of Catholic social justice teaching that supports workers' justice," said Kolpack, "but when it comes to living out these rights in the church, we are denied them: the right to unionize, the right to see one's personnel file, the right to address a wrongful termination. I pray taking action on this issue will bring us one step closer to worker's justice in the Church."

When asked why she wished the diocese should reconsider her dismissal, Kolpack commented, "The quote from Economic Justice For All is what the Bishops should stand by. They should be encouraged to live out their own words about no arbitrary dismissal."

Kolpack's supporters are now encouraging parishioners within the diocese of Madison to withhold contributions to the bishop's Annual Catholic Appeal, and instead respond to the fundraiser by sending in their appeal envelopes without money and with the words "Reinstate Ruth."

Jim Andrews, a parishioner at Ms. Kolpack's church and organizer of her campaign, said "We are asking Catholics in the Madison diocese to withhold their funds from the annual appeal until the Diocese reinstates Ruth and creates a worker justice policy in line with Catholic social justice teaching. We do this for Ruth today. We do this for the liturgist who was fired last year. We do this for the lay minister who could be fired tomorrow."

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A spokesperson for the diocese said trust had been lost and has not been regained.?

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