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Cincinnati nun given ultimatum over ordination views

by Judy Ball



Louise Akers

Cincinnati

After serving as a voice for justice for 40 years in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and beyond, Sister of Charity Louise Akers has been told by Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk to publicly disassociate herself from the issue of women's ordination if she wishes to continue making any presentations or teaching for credit in any archdiocesan-related institutions.

Read an update to this story: **[Archbishop explains why he barred nun-catechist](#)**

"We are losing the voice of justice," said one member of her religious community. Other women religious, lay friends, supporters and former students have called for "responsible dialogue" on the subject of women's ordination and have described the archbishop's stance as unjust and mystifying. Many are writing Pilarczyk to officially register their distress.

Akers and Pilarczyk met for 30 minutes Aug. 10 in his archdiocesan office in Cincinnati. She had requested the meeting after being informed that persons upset with her teaching had registered official complaints with church officials. Central to those complaints were both the presence of her name and photo on the Women's Ordination Conference web site and her membership on its advisory board.

Pilarczyk, in answer to a question from *NCR*, said, "It is not my custom to offer public comment on

personnel matters."

Akers frequently speaks and teaches at local parishes, often at the invitation of the Cincinnati Archdiocese's Office of Religious Education. Some years ago, that office asked her to design official courses for religious education certification on the subjects of church and justice. Other issues on which she frequently speaks are peace, racism and interreligious relations. She is coordinator of the Office of Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation for her religious community, which has approximately 450 members.

According to the 66-year-old Akers, the archbishop outlined two requirements during their meeting. First, that she remove her name from the ordination web site, a step she has since taken in an effort to defuse the "destructive assaults" against her. Secondly, that she publicly rescind her long-held stance supporting the ordination of women.

The latter is a step she cannot take. "To do so would go against my conscience," said Akers, who entered the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati in 1960, and holds a doctorate in feminist theology from the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass. Her master's thesis, from the University of Dayton, focused on the "Prophecy of Martin L. King, Jr."

"For four decades I have devoted my ministry to advocating on behalf of the marginalized through religious congregations, justice organizations, ecumenical and interfaith groups" Akers told NCR. "Women's ordination is a justice issue. Its basis is the value, dignity and equality of women. I believe this to my very core. To publicly state otherwise would be a lie and a violation of my conscience. I love, support and cherish the part of Church that upholds the gospel mission and vision of Jesus."

She quoted the words of Martin Luther, uttered centuries ago: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."

Her stance leaves her unable to make presentations at archdiocesan-sponsored events, to conduct retreats or reflection days, and to teach courses on any subject at sites that are directly related to the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. All have been part of her ministry and service to the church, whether full- or part-time.

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In 1985 she established the Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center in Cincinnati. In the 1990s she served as associate director of social concerns at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Around that same time she was a consultant to NETWORK and served as vice president of its board. From 1979 to 1984 she was a member of the Social Action Office staff in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, hired by then-Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin.

A local supporter is Father Paul Donohue, a member of the Comboni Missionaries. In a personal statement, he said: "It is mystifying to me that the Archbishop of Cincinnati would ask Sister of Charity Louise Akers to refrain from teaching for credit in the archdiocese. Both the archbishop and Sister Louise love, support, and cherish the Church that upholds the gospel mission and vision of Jesus. Both present what the Church teaches. In conscience, Sister Louise must raise questions regarding doctrine. In effect, her questions bring to focus the fact that the Church is a living community of men and women whose understanding develops over time upon reflection. Perhaps, her questions are prophetic. I hope we are not witnesses to a push toward "group think."

Dr. Brennan Hill, former chair of the theology department at Xavier University (Cincinnati), where Akers

taught as both adjunct and visiting professor off and on from 1986 to 2004, sees this as a moment that begs for dialogue. "Listening to the signs of the time," a central value of Vatican II, we need a lively dialogue about the rights of women in society and in the church. The severe lack of clergy challenges the rights of the faithful to Eucharist and sacramental ministry. Our age calls for respectful and responsible dialogue on many difficult issues. The ordination of women is certainly one of them. Silencing and punishing those who want to engage in this dialogue only serves to weaken the church and push away thoughtful and well-informed believers."

He continued: "Vatican II called for religious freedom, rejected coercion in religious matters and took a strong stand for the primacy of conscience."

Sr. Rosie Burns of Dayton, Ohio, who works with the homeless and has known Akers for decades, described her friend as a gifted teacher who invites people to "use the gifts God gives each of us. Louise never only allows her side (to dominate) but challenges the learner to think. She has a vast knowledge of the church's teachings on justice. She lives these teachings. We and our whole world will suffer with this loss. We are losing the "voice" of justice."

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Another Sister of Charity, Carol Leveque, a pastoral associate, described Akers as "passionate and compassionate as well as committed and faith-filled. She speaks her truth, does her homework. She listens well and respectfully to others. She is always able to address both sides of an issue because she has done her homework. When she speaks her truth, she names it as her truth. I am saddened to lose the voice of someone who has always been such a great advocate for justice and who challenges us to do the same."

Ironically, the same day Akers met with Pilarczyk, she was named to the new class of Leadership Cincinnati, a 10-month civic leadership program operated by the regional Chamber of Commerce.

Judy Ball is a freelance writer who occasionally writes for NCR.

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