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Support for ousted Australian bishop widens

by Tom Roberts



Bishop William Morris. Screen capture of Australian TV News QLD

The forced retirement of an Australian bishop who raised the possibility of ordaining women as a solution to that country's severe priest shortage was "inappropriate and unjust" according to a statement on the Web site of the Vincentian order in Australia.

The statement in support of Bishop William Morris of the Toowoomba diocese, just west of Brisbane, was signed by Vincentian Fr. Tim Williams and is the latest in a show of strong support from fellow clergy.

The Australia Broadcasting Corporation program "PM" reported that several hundred people gathered May 3 "in the wet weather near St Patrick's, Toowoomba's Catholic cathedral, to show their support for the sacked bishop, Bill Morris."

Pat Nunan, identified as a Catholic parishioner, told the radio program, "This is a spontaneous support for Bishop Bill Morris. Everybody in the community is still expressing a significant amount of shock and anger as a result of it. Hopefully the vigil tonight, the walk, will dissipate the anger but at the same time

concentrate on prayers for Bishop Bill, thanking him."

A statement by the National Council of Priests of Australia said the clergy organization is "embarrassed about the shabby treatment meted out to an outstanding pastor of this diocese." The group said it was "appalled at the lack of transparency and due process that led to this decision" and it expressed concern "about an element within the church whose restorationist ideology wants to repress freedom of expression" within the church.

See NCR's earlier story: **Australian priests offer support for deposed bishop**

"Bill Morris has been respected in his diocese for many years, and deserves better treatment than this," wrote Williams. "But, like many bishops, clergy and laity, he has been subjected to criticism from a small number of self-appointed liturgical and doctrinal watchdogs who, while generally ignorant of the real meaning of liturgy, church doctrine, and pastoral needs, see it as their calling to run to sympathetic ecclesiastical authorities with their destructive reports. Just as we wonder at the motivation behind the extremes of terrorism, it is hard to understand what distortion of Christianity drives these watchdogs in their efforts to bring down good people."

According to an Associated Press report from Sydney, eight priests of the Toowoomba diocese signed a strong letter of support, saying the bishop was treated "unfairly" and that the priests "find his removal profoundly disheartening." Catholics in the diocese reportedly conducted a candlelight vigil the evening of May 3 to express their support.

The Brisbane Times, meanwhile, reported that Morris, in a radio interview May 3, described a "creeping centralism in the church at the moment. There's a creeping authoritarianism."

He maintained, as he has all along, that a 2006 pastoral letter discussing the priest shortage had been misrepresented by a small group of dissidents within his diocese. He said he never advocated ordaining women or married men, but only set them out as part of a list of possibilities being discussed in the church from the local to global levels.

"I believe that a conversation needs to be had, whether it's on the ordination of women, whether it's on birth control, whether it's on whatever subject within the context today of the church and the life of the community and the life of the world," Morris said in the radio interview.

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Watch a video clip of Bishop Morris and his supporters from Australian TV. Look for this link on the right side of the Web page: **Video: Vatican 'ousted' Toowoomba bishop**

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