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The removal of Bishop Morris

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

The removal of Bishop William Morris from the pastoral care of the Australian diocese of Toowoomba, Queensland, where he has been bishop since 1993, is reminiscent of two other cases: that of Bishop Jacques Gaillot of the diocese of Evreux, Normandy, France, in 1995, where he had been bishop for 12 years, and the effective removal of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen from the archdiocese of Seattle in 1986, where he had been archbishop since 1975.

I say "effective removal" because, although Hunthausen was not removed as such, a younger bishop was installed over him, with authority that no longer belonged to the archbishop.

That younger bishop is now an archbishop himself and a cardinal as well: Donald Wuerl, who also heads the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, which just issued a condemnation of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God*. Johnson is a Sister of St. Joseph and is a Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University in New York.

Gaillot had been removed from his diocese for allegedly having failed to exercise "the ministry of unity."

Like Hunthausen Bishop, Gaillot had been a strong proponent of peace initiatives during the Cold War, and opposed the Persian Gulf war of 1991.

He was also an outspoken advocate of the homeless and gave interviews to gay magazines. He advocated an effective ministry to those with AIDS.

He was accused of marrying a gay couple. In actuality, he only met with the couple and prayed with them and for them. One of them was dying of AIDS. He also told a gay publication that there is a moral obligation to advise people at risk of contracting AIDS to protect themselves with condoms.

Like Morris, he supported the ordination of married men as priests and the return of married priests to the active ministry.

Gaillot criticized the French Government for passing tougher immigration laws, so much so that the Interior Minister is said to have complained personally to the Vatican.

Although none of these items yields a single compelling reason why Gaillot was removed from office, he had developed a public profile that was a source of profound irritation for conservatives within the French Government, like the Interior Minister, and the Catholic church, like Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, archbishop of Paris.

As in the cases of Hunthausen and now Morris, Gaillot was removed without any canonical process nor a formal review of his case by the national episcopal conference in France.

The Canon Law Society of America, meeting in Denver in October 1986, passed a resolution 173-53 that found the action against Hunthausen, known as "Dutch" to his friends and episcopal colleagues, "questionable from a canonical perspective."

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But the bishops completely ignored the resolution of the canonists, even though the bishops themselves had sent these priests away to obtain canonical degrees and then appointed them to their chanceries, tribunals, and seminary faculties.

It is significant, however, that the bishops deleted from their original draft a description of the Vatican procedures in the Hunthausen case as "just and reasonable." Moreover, after claiming that their episcopal conference had no legitimate role to play in the dispute, the final draft included a sentence in which the bishops offered "any assistance judged helpful and appropriate by the parties involved."

Some of the bishops were appalled that the Vatican had placed so much credence in the complaints of extremists. And this is what binds the cases of Morris, Gaillot, and Hunthausen.

A tiny group of ultra-conservative Catholics, with no formal training in theology, Scripture, liturgy, or canon law, can have an influence far greater than their numbers because they have friends in the Vatican.

Under Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI, they find sympathetic ears in the papacy itself.

And here is where the cases of Hunthausen and Morris diverge. When the Vatican came eventually to realize in the Hunthausen case that it had blown up in their faces, they agreed to send Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Cardinal John O'Connor, and Archbishop John Quinn as mediators in the crisis.

And so it was resolved. Wuerl returned to his own diocese of Pittsburgh in 1988 as its new bishop, and Hunthausen was allowed to retire with dignity in 1991.

Unfortunately, the Vatican sent the ultra-conservative Charles Chaput, archbishop of Denver, as its apostolic visitor to examine the charges against Bishop Morris.

Chaput could not have rendered an ideologically-free judgment. Bishop Morris never even saw a copy of Chaput's report.

Everything about this case speaks poorly of the leadership of the Church.

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