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Wisconsin bishop bans materials, speakers from interfaith center

by Joshua J. McElwee

Madison, Wis., Bishop Robert Morlino has forbidden his diocese's parishes and schools from using materials from an area interfaith spirituality center and banned the center's staff members, including two Catholic sisters, from speaking at all diocesan events, according to a letter from the diocesan vicar general.

The blanket ban, first reported Tuesday by the *Wisconsin State Journal*, concerns Wisdom's Well Interfaith Spirituality Center, which provides workshops and overnight retreats for people seeking spiritual direction.

Msgr. James Bartylla, Madison's vicar general, states in a Nov. 27 letter to the diocese's priests that even the center's advertisements for centering prayer are no longer to be distributed on parish property.

"Centering Prayer," Bartylla writes, "is a type of contemplative prayer, yet contemplative prayer is a charism usually only given to those advanced in the spiritual life, and in the absence of sound spiritual direction accompanied by orthodox doctrine, attempting contemplative prayer can be counterproductive and even seriously harmful."

The letter, signed by Bartylla on Morlino's behalf, says the diocese's concern with the center is "evidenced mainly from its website" and is centered on fears that the center and its members "may espouse certain views flowing from New Ageism."

The center and its members, Bartylla writes, also "may not share an authentic view of the Catholic Church's approach to interreligious dialogue."

While marked confidential, the Nov. 27 letter is available on the Madison diocese's website.

The letter bans priests from distributing materials from the center and bans "any past, present, or future staff or members" of the center from speaking or providing spiritual direction in the diocese.

The letter specifically names four women in the ban, including Dominican Srs. Maureen McDonnell and Lynn Lisbeth, both members of the Sinsinawa Dominican Congregation, which is headquartered in Sinsinawa, Wis.*, about 90 miles southwest of Madison.

McDonnell and Lisbeth declined to comment on the matter, referring to a news release written by Tricia Buxton, the communication director for the Sinsinawa Dominicans.

The sisters "are respected and valued members of the Sinsinawa Dominican Congregation," Buxton writes. "Both women have been dedicated to religious life and preaching and teaching Gospel values for nearly 50 years. We wholeheartedly support our Sisters and hold them in prayer as we continue our mission of participating in the building of a holy and just Church and society."

Advertisement

Bartylla's letter says the diocese has "patiently monitored" the center in previous years, and "sought clarification from individuals associated with Wisdom's Well" in September 2011.

"The responses from these individuals proved insufficient and inconclusive to resolve the grave concerns," Bartylla writes.

The decision to issue the blanket ban came about after people associated with the center had recently sought permission to speak in the diocese, Bartylla writes.

The Madison diocese requires Morlino's approval of any speakers at Catholic parishes, schools, and organizations.

Wisdom's Well Interfaith Spirituality Center was founded by McDonnell and others in 2006 to "support those who desire to grow spiritually, seek inner wisdom, and yearn for a transformative spirituality," according to its website.

"Grounded in the Christian tradition, while embracing the wisdom found in other religious traditions, we offer resources for the journey through spiritual guidance, educational programs, retreats, and the teaching of contemplative practices," the center's website states.

Among previous programs hosted by the group is a series on the writings of Thomas Merton titled "Bridges to Contemplative Living." The group is also set to host a series next fall on "The Challenge and Promise of Nonviolence for Our Time" with the Madison chapter of Pax Christi, an international Catholic peace movement.

The Madison diocese's speaker approval policy, first issued in August 2010, requires "any speaker under consideration to give a presentation on matters of faith and morals" to attain Morlino's approval.

Cardinals, bishops "in communion with the Holy See," priests or deacons of the diocese in good standing, and diocesan parish and school staff members are exempt from the policy.

All applications must include the speaker's *curriculum vitae*. Laypersons must also include a letter of support from their pastor and clerics must provide proof they are allowed to celebrate the sacraments.

College or university professors must provide proof of a *mandatum*, an official statement from their diocesan bishop indicating they are teaching "within the full communion of the Catholic Church."

**An earlier version of this story included the incorrect state.*

[Joshua J. McElwee is an NCR staff writer. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

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