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Catholic bishop returns petitions to ousted gay man

David Gibson Religion News Service | Apr. 25, 2013
New York

The story of a Long Island Catholic ousted from his parish jobs for marrying his male partner generated headlines, outrage and an 18,000-signature petition to Bishop William Murphy to have Nicholas Coppola reinstated.

But now the tale has an odd coda: Murphy, who heads the diocese of Rockville Centre, mailed the petitions back to Coppola with a one-line cover letter on the bishop's stationery that reads: "FROM YOUR FAITHFUL ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOP."

No signature, nothing else.

What's more, instead of sending the package to Faithful America, one of the liberal advocacy groups that has taken up Coppola's cause, Murphy's office sent it to Faith in Public Life, a social justice lobby based in Washington. Faith in Public Life forwarded the package to Faithful America, which said it received it Tuesday.

"I really don't understand what sort of message Bishop Murphy is trying to send," Coppola said in a statement provided by GLAAD, a gay rights organization that has also been promoting his case. "Is he no longer listening to the voices of the faithful? I have more questions than anything now."

Sean Dolan, a spokesperson for Murphy, on Thursday confirmed the bishop had sent the 300 sheets of paper with the signatures back to Coppola.

In a statement, Dolan said the petition and the way its delivery was staged for the media "was designed to misinform the press and the intended recipient," and was "only designed to promote the organizations behind this spectacle."

"All legitimate correspondence sent to the Office of the Bishop either by email or regular U.S. Mail is responded to," Dolan said in the statement. "Online petitions of this nature lack legitimacy (and) are not considered correspondence and therefore do not warrant a response."

Coppola's dismissal in January resulted from an anonymous letter sent to Murphy complaining that Coppola had married his partner in October under New York's new gay marriage law.

Earlier this month, after New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan said the church had to be more welcoming of gays and lesbians, Coppola went public with his story of being ousted from his roles as a religious education teacher, lector and altar server at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Oceanside.

A week later, Coppola delivered to Murphy's office a petition with 18,000 signatures requesting that he be reinstated. A new petition, which has some 21,000 signatures, is seeking a get-to-know-you dinner between Dolan, Coppola and his husband.

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