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'Thesis not sole cause of Kolpack dismissal'

Thomas C. Fox | Apr. 2, 2009

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A 2003 master?s thesis of a pastoral associate in Beloit, Wis., was not, alone, the reason for her dismissal, according to a March 31 statement on the Madison diocese Web site.

The thesis, written by Ruth Kolpack, 64, who was fired March 12 from her position at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish by Madison Bishop Robert Morlino, had argued for more gender-inclusive language in the Mass and was critical of church structure.

Since her termination, the diocese has refused to discuss specifics in the case, saying it has wanted to protect Kolpack?s reputation.

Kolpack and her supporters have said that during a brief meeting Morlino required her to denounce her thesis, make a profession of faith and take an oath of loyalty to remain in her position. She told parishioners she could do the latter two, but could not denounce her thesis. To do so, she said, ?would be dishonest of me.?

The **diocesan statement** [1], presented in the form of answers to ?frequently asked questions? in the Kolpack case, gives another view. ?Whether someone is 18 or 24 years old, or in their late 50s, what they write in a college paper, or graduate thesis, should not be, by itself, the grounds for their termination. Statements that this is why Ms. Kolpack was fired are false.

?The collegiate and university settings are often the acceptable place for discussion of church teaching and discipline. However, the parish and the work of a parish employee (especially a professional catechist) can never be the setting for such debate, especially when it involves established church doctrine, which will not and cannot change.?

The Madison diocese statement came in the form of ?points of clarification? regarding the Kolpack case.

Kolpack was let go, according to the statement, ?because the bishop is not confident she can or will present the complete and authentic teaching of the church, the presentation of which he is responsible for in every parish in the diocese.?

?While any Catholic may, at times, question or lack a complete understanding of a particular church teaching, it only makes sense to expect all catechists and parish leaders to faithfully impart the authentic, complete and integral teachings of the church, avoiding any compromise due to one?s personal opinion.?

Before the bishop made his decision, the statement goes on to say, ?Kolpack had the opportunity to meet with him and assure him that she would faithfully carry out her role as a catechist of the Roman Catholic faith. Ms. Kolpack claimed that, in good conscience, she was unable to comply.?

The statement explains that Morlino believed that ?to be true to his conscience and to the oaths he took as bishop, he had to make the decision he did, as chief teacher, and to insure that the truth is being taught to our Catholic faithful.?

The statement also deals with Kolpack?s alleged connection with Call to Action, a Chicago-based church-reform group.

The statement asks: ?Was Ruth fired because of her involvement with Call to Action??

It then answers: ?No. Ms. Kolpack?s involvement with the group ?Call to Action,? which was not clear until hours after her termination, was not a part of any discussions regarding Ms. Kolpack?s departures from authentic Catholic teaching.

?Call to Action is noted, however, for their own serious departures and denials of the authentic teaching of the Catholic church. Associating with such anti-Catholic groups as Call to Action, Catholics for a Free Choice, Women?s Ordination Conference, FutureChurch, CORPUS, DignityUSA, and many others, would certainly be grounds for removal of someone charged with passing on the church?s teaching, which these groups openly reject.

?Likewise, it seems disingenuous that anyone associated with these groups would commit themselves to teaching what they themselves don?t believe. Again, however, this was not the case with regard to Ms. Kolpack, as the diocese was unaware of any association prior to her termination.?

The statement then asks: ?In other places people belonging to groups such as Call to Action have been excommunicated, why hasn?t the bishop just excommunicated them??

It answers: ?If a formal excommunication would do little to bring a person outside of church communion back into Christ?s sheepfold, or only serve to drive them further from full communion with the Catholic church, then it is of little or no use (although excommunication also has the purpose of repairing scandal and so, should it be necessary, this could be a valid reason for the declaration thereof).?

The statement asks: ?Is it true that Ms. Kolpack was not given an opportunity to confront her accusers, and that there was no due process in this matter??

It answers: ?The optimal process, as described above, would have seen any issues resolved, lovingly, in a one-on-one basis, within parish structures. But again, this is not always the case. ?

?In Ms. Kolpack?s case, there is well-warranted and serious concern. She was given the benefit of the doubt for a number of years and alternate resolutions were sought prior to the meeting at which she was let go. The serious concerns brought to the bishop?s attention should not have been news to Ms. Kolpack. As stated previously, Ms. Kolpack had an opportunity to establish the bishop?s trust to teach in his name, in his parish.

? ?Due process? has its place in criminal matters. Were this a criminal accusation, canonically or civilly, the proper canonical or civil process would then come into effect. This is not a trial, but simply a matter of trust. Can the bishop trust that Ms. Kolpack will teach the truth of Jesus Christ as revealed to his church, without compromise? In the end, in his prudential judgment, the bishop decided he could not. Ms. Kolpack was let go and her termination did follow a process.?

The statement ends by asking: ?Is it possible for Ms. Kolpack to be reinstated??

It answers: ?The bishop?s prudential judgment to no longer allow Ms. Kolpack to continue teaching in one of his parishes is not likely to be reversed. However, the bishop has stated that we should ?never say never? in this regard.?

In his column this week: Mike Sweitzer-Beckman looks at some **background to the firing of pastoral associate Ruth Kolpack** [2].

[Tom Fox is NCR editor. His e-mail address is tfox@ncronline.org.]

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