NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Madison bishop hears supporters of fired parish worker

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Apr. 4, 2009

Kolpack outside parish (Photo: Mike Sweitzer-Beckman)

Madison Bishop Robert Morlino met in a packed church hall with parishioners of St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Beloit, Wis., Friday night to discuss why he fired Ruth Kolpack, a pastoral associate, last month.

He said little but listened to a number of Kolpack supporters who vigorously defended their dismissed parishioner.

In 2003, Kolpack wrote a thesis for a master?s degree in which she argued for more gender-inclusive language in Catholic liturgies. Last month, after meeting with Kolpack briefly, the bishop asked her to denounce that paper. When she refused, he fired her.

Details on what precisely led to the dismissal have not been divulged. However, a statement on the Madison diocese's Web site explained that the bishop acted because he could not trust her to teach authentic Catholic doctrine.

Kolpack has been a member of St. Thomas parish for 35 years and worked there for 26 years. Her termination upset many parishioners there.

Morlino had agreed to meet with St. Thomas parishioners and came to the parish Friday evening where an estimated 300 to 400 supporters had gathered.

The event was held in the church's basement, many standing around the edges of the room, with overflow crowding into other rooms in the church in order to hear parishioners testify in support of Kolpack through the church's old sound system.

About a dozen parishioners spoke. From the beginning, Morlino made it clear that he would say little and listen to the parishioners. At the end he asked everyone to pray for those involved.

The meeting was closed to the media, but participants spoke to *NCR* at the parish following the event.

Before the meeting, Kolpack said she hoped Morlino would ?take to heart? what people planned to say.

When asked if she knew why she had been fired, she said the focus seemed to have shifted from her thesis to claims that in her parish work she had diverged from official Catholic teaching. This claim seemed to be at the heart of the diocesan statement released earlier in the week.

Morlino arrived on time, at 6:30 p.m., and greeted onlookers before hustling into the basement of the church. The meeting lasted over an hour. The bishop was one of the first to exit. When asked by *NCR* if he had been well-received he exclaimed, "Yes!" before stepping into his car for the trip back to Madison.

Sue Hartley, one of the parishioners to testify at the meeting, said she had grown disaffected with her local parish and had dropped out of active participation until she ran into Kolpack who encouraged her to attend St. Thomas.

"I decided to go [to St. Thomas], and I'm still here. I work as a greeter, and Ruth has helped me to see the power in greeting people before mass. She has helped me seek out the people who stand in the back and don't feel comfortable sitting with the rest of the parish because they have felt rejected in the past by the Catholic Church."

Hartley's daughter, Monica, 25, said she never heard Ruth diverge from church teachings. ?She has always challenged me when she thought that I wasn't living the faith as well as I could, but I know she loves me anyway!"

"How many people would it take to fill Ruth's position?" asked Sue Hartley. "Someone should ask Fr. Steve [Kortendick, pastor at St. Thomas]. I wonder if he even knows?"

Richard Newsome and his family have been parishioners at St. Thomas for nearly forty years. "I'm disappointed that Ruth was fired," he told NCR after the meeting. "Bishop Morlino said that it was 'external forces' that made him fire Ruth.

Newsome added that everyone who spoke tonight was "very affirming and supportive" of the work Ruth has done. "What happens next remains to be seen."

"If Ruth is not reinstated, my family and I feel that there needs to be some consequence," he said. "Some [people in my family] are thinking about not attending mass at St. Thomas anymore. I'm not ready to commit to that. I've thought about withholding money from the Diocesan appeal that I contribute to every year, but this is a very difficult [economic] time to withhold money from people who depend on the important services the Diocese provides."

When Kolpack exited the church nearly an hour after the meeting had ended. She said she was very pleased with the gathering.

"The outpouring of support," she said, "from the around the country and the world has been incredible -- from cards, phone calls, e-mails and flowers from people I don't even know."

She added that she would sleep better tonight than she did the night before. Following the meeting Kolpack and friends went to a local restaurant for a Friday fish dinner.

In his column this week: Mike Sweitzer-Beckman looks at some **background to the firing of pastoral associate Ruth Kolpack** [1].

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