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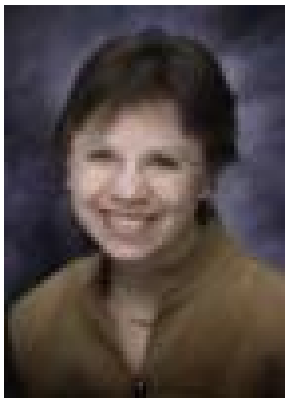
Terminated: a visit with a fired church worker

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Dec. 16, 2010

It was 21 months ago that I began covering the termination of Ruth Kolpack [1], a pastoral associate at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Beloit, Wis. Kolpack had been employed at the parish through the Madison diocese since 1983 and had been a leader in the parish community for more 35 years. As you might recall, Kolpack was terminated by Bishop Robert Morlino for reasons not entirely disclosed to the public, but signs point to both anonymous complaints from a handful of parishioners and the dissertation she wrote for her master's degree from St. Francis Seminary in 2003.

Fortunately, Kolpack found work this past January at a local hospice agency in Beloit. It took her some 10 months to get this job, and she was at the end of her rope: she was ready to apply for and accept an inventory clerk job at a local warehouse in order to help her family make ends meet. Then she lucked out and got the job after the previous person in this position had to stop working due to health reasons. In her new job, she works to bridge the gap between the clinical and social aspects of serving hospice patients and their families. It's an opportunity for her to use many of her people and organizing skills that she picked up while working at the parish for so many years.



I had a chance to meet with Kolpack in Beloit in November to see how life is going for her during Advent -- the time reserved in the liturgical calendar for waiting. Unfortunately, Kolpack is still waiting for more resolution and disclosure on her termination by the diocese, and she doesn't think that she'll ever get it.

During the time of her termination from St. Thomas, Madison's chancellor Kevin Phelan met with her pastor, Fr. Steve Kortendick. The two weren't able to find a resolution in Kolpack's employment, which led to Morlino firing her. She herself never had the chance to meet with Phelan about the accusations raised against her. Ironically, Phelan called her about another matter a few weeks ago and the two spoke amicably. Kolpack is left to wonder why such dialog didn't happen between the two before she was fired.

Amazingly, Kolpack has continued to participate at the parish from which she was fired nearly two years ago. She continues to sing in the choir and maintains many of the relationships she formed with parishioners during her time there. Apparently, the diocese can take away her job but can't take away the relationships. Kortendick has since been re-assigned, and the parish has seen transition in other ways as well: the fellow who was hired in

August 2009 to replace Kolpack and quit in December. He left a note and his keys in his office and walked out. According to the parish?s website [2], Jessica Brey now fills the role of pastoral associate at St. Thomas.

Kolpack still gets to practice a ministerial role at her new job. She recalled doing a chaplaincy visit in the home of a patient. When she arrived, she found the patient had already died and was lying in bed in her living room. Kolpack found the family huddled in the kitchen in mourning. She asked them if they would like to pray, so they gathered around the bed in the living room for prayer and then began sharing what they loved about the person who had passed away.

Kolpack and the parishioners she ministered with over the years may never know the entire truth of why the diocese fired her. The line from Brent King, the diocesan director of communications, at the time of her firing was: "It is out of respect for the dignity and good reputation of every person involved, in this and all personnel matters, that specifics cannot and will not be discussed. You can be assured that the canonical and civil rights of each individual have been upheld absolutely. The church takes this very seriously. I cannot make statements regarding Kolpack, as they could injure her good reputation."

Unfortunately, her termination has tainted her reputation among both supporters and non-supporters alike. Both sides are forced to make their own presumptions and conclusions without ever having the entire truth. It is true that the Madison diocese is an at-will employer and can terminate any employee at any time. The glitch in this method is when it terminates employees who work in the public eye, then there are going to be public repercussions that the diocese has to mediate in order to retain the trust of its flock.

The termination of Kolpack is not an isolated incident in this country. Perhaps many of us know of a similar story to Kolpack's. A small grass-roots group of concerned Catholics are putting together a Web site that details the stories of several fired church workers. They are also working on a documentary film due out in 2011. Look for more on that in the near future.

[**Editor's Note:** This link will take you to a copy of a letter [3] Ruth Kolpack sent to Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., detailing how she believes her civil and canonical rights were violated in the process that resulted in her termination. Kolpack says that although she received a reply from the bishop, he was unwilling to meet with her.]

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