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Corapi's leave violates canon law, says company

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Mar. 29, 2011

WASHINGTON -- A representative of the media company owned by Fr. John Corapi challenged the action to place the popular speaker on administrative leave from priestly ministry, saying that it was illicit under "several points of canon law."

Bobbi Ruffatto, vice president of operations at Santa Cruz Media, Inc., in Kalispell, Mont., charged in a posting on Corapi's Facebook page March 25 that Bishop William M. Mulvey of Corpus Christi, Texas, acted improperly, according to canon lawyers consulted by the company.

The statement offered no specific citations of canon law.

However, Marty Wind, director of communications for the Diocese of Corpus Christi, disputed Ruffatto's claim that Bishop Mulvey placed Father Corapi on leave. He said the action was taken by officials of the priest's order, the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity in Robstown, Texas.

"We have been clear from the beginning that the bishop of Corpus Christi was notified by the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity that the administrative leave was imposed by the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, not the bishop of the diocese," Wind told Catholic News Service March 25.

Corapi was placed on administrative leave following an accusation of misconduct by a former Santa Cruz Media employee.

The priest denied any wrongdoing in a statement on his website March 18. He gave little information about the accusation except to say a former employee had "sent a three-page letter to several bishops accusing me of everything from drug addiction to multiple sexual exploits with her and several adult women."

Fr. Gerard Sheehan, regional priest servant for the society, said March 28 he had not yet seen Ruffatto's posting and that no formal discussion within the order about it had occurred.

The investigation into the former Santa Fe Media employee's claim has yet to begin, Sheehan added, because the two priests who will conduct the probe had not yet been named. Bishop Mulvey instructed the religious community to ask two priests who are not diocesan clergy and who are not members of the order to investigate the allegations.

Sheehan said he was waiting for clarification from the diocese before choosing the priest investigators.

Wind said that although Corapi was placed on leave, "it's been the position of the Diocese of Corpus Christi from the outset that the presumption of innocence until proven otherwise is of the highest importance."

Calls and emails from Catholic News Service to Santa Cruz Media requesting comment from Corapi and Ruffatto were not returned.

Online records with the Montana secretary of state list John Corapi as the registered agent for the company. A company with the same name also is registered in Nevada and online records in the secretary of state's office there indicated John A. Corapi holds the office of president, treasurer, secretary and director.

Ruffatto's six-paragraph statement referenced the U.S. bishops' zero-tolerance policy as outlined by the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and called for it to be changed "because of false accusations like this."

Corapi has been an outspoken critic of the charter in interviews and during his public presentations.

"There is no evidence at this time that Father Corapi did anything wrong, only the unsubstantiated rant of a former employee, who, after losing her job with this office, physically assaulted me and another employee and promised to destroy Father Corapi," Ruffatto said.

"We all continue to pray for this person and we ask you to do the same," the Santa Cruz executive added.

Ruffatto said the company would continue selling the books, DVDs, and other video and audio recordings of its owner as the investigation unfolds. Ruffatto said the purchases of customers would allow Corapi to continue his work as well as pay for legal expenses to fight the allegation.

"We are a secular corporation and not affiliated with the Catholic Church in any way," the company official said. "As such, we are not under the jurisdiction of any bishop or other official in the Catholic Church, although we have the utmost respect for church authority."

After the 63-year-old priest was placed on leave, EWTN suspended broadcasts of his widely viewed television program. In an unsigned statement on its website, the Catholic broadcast network said officials took the step "with much prayer and careful discernment."

"In EWTN's 30 years of existence the network has never knowingly aired programming featuring any priest whose priestly faculties have been suspended," the statement said. "The network has always responded consistently and immediately in such situations by removing such programs from the air. We are obliged to do so in obedience to the discipline of the church."

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