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Australian religious orders express distress at bishop's ouster

Tom Roberts | May. 13, 2011

St Joseph Sr. Anne Derwin (Photo taken from the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart Web site)

Religious orders in Australia weighed in today on the ouster of Bishop William Morris, expressing their members' distress at the loss of a pastor who had a deep connection with his people and asking pointed questions about the process that led to the pope's decision to force him to retire.

The assessment -- which came in a letter signed by Josephite Sr. Ann Derwin, president of Catholic Religious Australia, and sent to the country?s apostolic nuncio -- says that members of religious orders, many of whom work in Morris' diocese of Toowoomba ?are especially distressed at the loss of their pastor, a man they believe to be solicitous of all Christ?s faithful entrusted to his care -- especially the needy and marginalized.?

?They and the people with whom they minister are left with an abiding sense of disempowerment and confusion,? the letter continues.

CRA is the public name for the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes. Its membership is representative of more than 180 congregations of sisters, brothers and priests living and working throughout Australia.

The organization?s executive group -- consisting of Derwin, Divine Word Missionary Fr. Tim Norton and Mercy Sr. Marie Duffy -- says in a separate letter to Australian religious congregation leaders that they were present throughout a week-long meeting of the Australian bishops as they ?grappled with their response to the situation.?

That meeting saw the bishops produce a letter yesterday to Toowoomba?s apostolic administrator, Bishop Brian Finnigan, in which they said they would continue ?discussion of the process and the decision which it produced? during their ad limina visit to Rome later this year [1]. Bishops are required to make the visits every five years to report on the state of the church in their regions.

In the letter to the nuncio, Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto, Derwin writes that she is advancing three questions that are being asked as a result of conversation with religious throughout the church in Australia:

First: ?How can all in our church be heard and empowered by our ecclesiastical leaders and processes when

private and confidential opinions are given such importance??

The question refers to the confidential report done by Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput, who conducted an apostolic visitation and submitted a written report to Rome that has never been made public. Morris has said he thinks the document should be made public and that the people in Toowoomba deserve to know what judgment was made about their diocese.

Derwin notes that letters of pastoral support for Morris have been sent to Rome by all pastoral leaders and members of the Toowoomba Diocesan Pastoral Council and by the majority of the priests of the diocese.

?We wonder how the words of this group were heard in this process,? she writes.

Second: ?How is the decreasing availability of the Eucharist, ?the source and summit of our lives,? to be addressed into the future??

Because of the size of the diocese of Toowoomba, and its rural nature, the sacraments are available to some only on a monthly basis, Derwin said -- adding that the situation will only get worse as the number of priests continues to decline.

?Bishop Morris, aware of this situation, suggested the need for conversation. What is the message of our church in these difficult circumstances?? she asked.

Third: ?What do we say to the people who have lost an inspirational shepherd and pastor at a time that the people most need him??

Derwin recounted that Morris -- whom she described as ?vigorous in promoting prayer and ecumenical dialogue? and ?tireless? in pressing for professional standards in ministry -- was particularly active in accompanying rural Australians who in recent years suffered through the effects of drought and ?dramatic floods that have taken a high toll in lives and property.?
She said the Australia, where many are leaving the church, needed bishops ?who are first and foremost pastors? in order to bring people back to the church.

A third letter, similar in content to the one addressed for Lazzarotto, was sent to Archbishop Philip Wilson, president of the Australian bishops? conference, with the hope that the questions outlined would be carried to Rome during the ad limina visit.

Copies of the letters mentioned in this report are here:

- Letter to Australia's religious congregation leaders [2]
- Letter to Archbishop Wilson [3]
- Letter to Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto [4]

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- **Australian bishops to discuss Morris ouster during ad limina visits** [1]
- **Forced retirement is message to all bishops, Morris says** [5], by Tom Roberts, May 10.
- **A long-simmering tension over 'creeping infallibility'** [6], a background piece by John Allen, May 9.
- **Bp Morris: 'You've got to stand in your truth.'** [7], Tom Roberts and Josh McElwee, May 5
- **Bishop's firing makes pope's priorities clear** [8], an NCR editorial, May 4
- **Support for ousted Australian bishop widens** [9], Tom Roberts, May 4
- **Australian priests offer support for deposed bishop** [10], Tom Roberts, May 3
- **Women's ordination group responds to bishop's ouster** [11], Women's Ordination Conference, May 3
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