



Diocese of Madison Office of Communications

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In recent days, the Diocese of Madison was approached by a local reporter regarding a story about the “Sunday ecumenical Eucharist at Holy Wisdom Monastery.” While we trust in his attempt to explain the Church’s teaching on these sensitive matters, the reality of space limitations will not always allow for every important fact to be shared with the public. To that end, of sharing the entirety of the Diocese’s answers with both the faithful and general public, we offer the following:

We thank the Wisconsin State Journal for the opportunity to answer some of these questions. Hopefully, this is an occasion for us to clarify a number of important issues.

[Holy Wisdom] is a congregation of about 335 people, with an estimated majority of them disaffected Catholics who've left parishes in the Diocese over disagreements with Catholic Church doctrine in general or Bishop Morlino specifically.

It is important to emphasize initially that the teachings of the Catholic Church are not created by any bishop or his priests, but are the teachings of Jesus Christ as handed down from the Apostles and safeguarded by their successors, the Pope and the College of Bishops. It saddens us that in our culture, not all baptized Catholics believe in the entirety of the faith they profess as it is summarized in the Catechism. But given the culture in which we live, sadly, it is not surprising.

Regarding the Benedictine community, we approached Abbot Marcel Rooney, OSB (Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order, 1996-2000) who now lives in Madison and has started a liturgical institute in the diocese, to see if he might offer some context to the situation regarding this former Benedictine Monastery. Abbot Rooney notes: *Like many Americans, religious communities in this country have been affected by the increased secularization and popular philosophies and trends of our age. This has, in some places, led to a chosen separation between that community and the Rule of that order; between a local religious group and the larger religious order, and, too often, between them and the universal Church. Sadly, for a number of groups in this country, this has been happening for 50 years. Even as a Benedictine Abbot, I need to remind myself that I am defined first by my Catholic faith, then by the Rule of St. Benedict, and then by my own thoughts, desires, and persuasions, and never the other way around. This is true of all Catholics, relative to our calling in life.*

Likewise, it is extremely sad when a bishop is fulfilling his duty and mission to proclaim the Gospel to all the people in a diocese, that some would fault that bishop for simply

teaching the faith. Similarly, if an individual has a disagreement with a bishop over an act or style of Church governance, this is hardly a reason to separate oneself from the Church of Jesus Christ.

As I'm sure you're aware, the Benedictine sisters are no longer under the jurisdiction of the Diocese. I'm wondering if you or someone else in the Diocese would be willing to comment for the story. These are the main questions:

1.) Why was it necessary for the Diocese and the monastery to part ways in 2006? (My understanding is that it had become a mutually untenable relationship, but perhaps that's not accurate. I would want to know the Diocese's version of what happened.)

The former Sisters of St. Benedict and the Monastery of St. Benedict Center in Madison (known commonly as the St. Benedict Retreat and Conference Center) were never under the canonical “jurisdiction” of the Bishop of Madison. Rather, they were part of the worldwide Benedictine Order and, therefore, had a significant degree of juridical autonomy from the Diocese of Madison. Insofar as a monastery is located within a diocese, the bishop has authority over the liturgy celebrated there and any apostolic works carried on there (education, charity, etc.), but the monastery is self-governed as far as internal governance.

There was never a need or even a request, on the part of the Diocese, that St. Benedict’s Monastery should be anything other than Catholic.

It seems their choice to move in this non-Catholic direction was in the works for a number of years, at least since 1992 according to their website. During Bishop Morlino’s tenure, there were several meetings and conversations between the sisters and the bishop. There seemed to be a cordial dialogue taking place on a variety of issues and therefore it was a surprise when the two remaining sisters advised the bishop that they had been granted a release, by Rome, from their vows as Benedictine Sisters, in 2006. While Bishop Morlino was surprised, he was in no way unfriendly toward their desire to start a non-Catholic ecumenical community. He did however ask that they not reserve the Holy Eucharist or have Mass celebrated on site, so as not to cause confusion. Many people had visited St. Benedict’s Monastery over the years and the bishop felt it would take time for people to understand that it was no longer a Roman Catholic institution. They understood the bishop’s position and agreed to follow his directive for the sake of those who might be confused by the change.

Also in 2006, Bishop Morlino noted that engagement in ecumenical efforts would be suitable only for Catholic adults with a clear understanding of the teachings of the Catholic Church, and with a solid commitment to these teachings.

2.) Many of the people who attend the service maintain they are still Catholics, even though they disagree with the Church on issues such as birth control, abortion, homosexual marriage and women priests. Are they Catholics?

It does seem very clear that Holy Wisdom Monastery does not, itself, claim to be a Catholic institution. In regards to Catholic individuals who attend services at Holy Wisdom Monastery and who disagree with Church doctrine, the question of their status is a good one. Instead of judging if they are Catholic or not, it is better to speak about being in communion with the universal Church. In a fundamental sense, all who are baptized Catholics remain so forever by the indelible nature of baptism. However, an individual can compromise his or her full communion with the Catholic Church, by persistent refusal or denial of the Church's definitive teachings; separating themselves from the sacramental life of the Church, and by refusal of ecclesiastical governance. Catholics who compromise themselves in such a manner from the Church are not in full communion with the Catholic Church, which has serious moral consequences.

Example: It is like being a member of a family. I'll always be a member of my family, no matter how far away we grow or how estranged I might be from them. The beauty is that we can always come back home.

In all charity, Catholics must be reminded that to fulfill their obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, they must attend a Catholic Mass validly offered through the ordained Catholic priesthood. Holy Wisdom Monastery does not offer such a Catholic Mass as part of their worship service.

3.) What is the Bishop's view of the weekly services held at Holy Wisdom?

Since Holy Wisdom Monastery is an ecumenical monastery without juridical status in the Roman Catholic Church, it should be clear that neither the liturgy, teaching, or governance at Holy Wisdom Monastery is part of the Catholic Church. And, because we know so little about what they do or preach, it is difficult to say much more. Along with other good Christians of other denominations, they are simply not in communion with the Catholic Church. The disassociation of Holy Wisdom Monastery and the Benedictine Women of Madison from their former juridical status in the Catholic Church was a voluntary and unilateral decision of its members. However, in an ecumenical spirit, we hold Holy Wisdom Monastery in Christian love.

We offer one additional note: A formerly-Catholic monastery using the term "Eucharistic" is terribly confusing, and potentially very scandalous, to Catholics. We have received calls from people, unaware that Holy Wisdom is no longer a Catholic monastery, asking: "what it is and if worship there fulfills their obligation?" In charity, we must respond that it does not.

4.) What is the diocese's response when it hears of parishioners who've left parishes because of some action of the Pope or Bishop Morlino or the Church in general?

Speaking more broadly to the issue of those who have left their Catholic faith, our response is always one of love and charity towards our brothers and sisters who belong in our family as fellow members of the Catholic Church. Therefore, we are sad due to the loss of their departure from the community of faith and we pray for their return to full communion with Christ and His Church. Believing in the efficaciousness of prayer, this leaves us full of hope that Our Heavenly Father will guide them in their search for truth and bring them back into full communion with Jesus Christ, in and through his Church.

We express every measure of good will toward them in their respective journeys in search of truth. We humbly invite anyone disaffected with the Catholic Church to consider approaching the Diocese or their local parish with their concerns as we work towards understanding and healing.

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