

doubleX^{beta}

Published on *Double X* (<http://www.doublex.com>)

[Home](#) > Why Is the Catholic Church Firing Women?

Why Is the Catholic Church Firing Women?

It's what they think, not what they do.

By: Claire Bushey

Posted: December 17, 2009 at 8:25 AM

In her 14 years as a pastoral associate at St. Thomas the Apostle parish in Beloit, Wis., Ruth Kolpack kept quiet whenever her opinion on gay rights or women's ordination veered away from official Catholic Church teaching. Parishioners, she said, didn't know that she sometimes personally disagreed with the church's stance until March, when the local bishop fired her.

Bishop Robert Morlino of the Madison diocese questioned Kolpack last March about the master's thesis she wrote in 2003 about using gender-inclusive language in liturgy. Morlino demanded she make a profession of faith, sign an oath of loyalty, and renounce her thesis. When Kolpack declined to renounce her thesis because it would be academically dishonest, Morlino fired her. A few weeks later, the diocese issued a press release saying Kolpack was fired "because the Bishop is not confident she can or will represent the complete and authentic teaching of the Church."

Kolpack is one of a growing number of church employees dismissed for their objections, real or perceived, to the Catholic hierarchy's positions on controversial issues. These are not people who publicly opposed the church; Sister Christine Schenck, executive director of the church reform group FutureChurch, said none of the half-dozen workers who lost their jobs to whom she has talked over the past 18 months had publicly aired their progressive views. Instead, cases like Kolpack's illustrate how, these days, some bishops are refusing to tolerate even private dissent, a departure from the ethos of Vatican II in the 1960s, which privileged the consciences of believers above church law. Pope Benedict XVI says he wants a smaller, purer church, and it seems he doesn't mind if a few pesky liberals go over the side.

About 30,000 lay ministers work in U.S. parishes, prisons, and hospitals. Eighty percent of them are women. Unlike priests, lay ministers are not ordained and cannot administer the sacraments, but they serve essential ecclesiastical functions, working as parish administrators, youth ministers, and directors of religious education. There are no statistics on how many of them have been fired because of their views, but church reform advocates say a pattern is emerging from the anecdotal evidence: A progressive lay minister will work without incident for years in conjunction with an older, Vatican II-era priest, only to be fired when that priest retires and is replaced by a younger, more conservative cleric.

That's what happened to Roberta Horton, the director of religious education at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Naples, Fla. She lost her job in May after she clashed with the 38-year-old pastor who arrived last fall. Horton said he objected to her teaching that the biblical creation story was a myth and that no man-made law should prevent a person from receiving the sacraments. He also balked at her attending a gay rights prayer service as a church representative, as she'd done during the previous pastor's tenure.

In the last 30 years there's been a dramatic expansion of the body of teachings to which Catholics must assent wholly to remain "in good standing," according to theologian Richard Gaillardetz, a professor at the University of Toledo. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's catechism watchdog committee, began asking certain clergy and theologians to pledge allegiance to every formal doctrinal pronouncement; it was no longer sufficient for them to agree on dogma alone. Then the Vatican went a step further. In the 1990s it investigated an American priest and nun for their ministry to gays and lesbians. Though the pair never publicly disagreed with the church's condemnation of homosexual acts, they still were disciplined because they were suspected of privately withholding assent to certain teachings.

Under Pope Benedict XVI, conservative bishops have continued the work they began under his predecessor. For example, the archdiocese in St. Louis, Mo., authorized the surreptitious videotaping of a 2007 ceremony in which women were ordained, a practice forbidden by the church, and then used the recording as evidence to punish a parish pastoral associate who attended, [according to the National Catholic Reporter](#) [2].

When a lay minister loses her job, there's often little she can do. The law and the courts grant wide latitude to religious

institutions when it comes to employment law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars employers from discriminating on the basis of religion—but there is an exception for religious institutions, which can not only give preference to the faithful but can discriminate based on how closely an employee hews to religious doctrine. Judges also routinely dismiss lawsuits against religious institutions to avoid the possibility of infringing on the institution’s First Amendment right to the free exercise of religion. This is referred to as the ministerial exception or the church autonomy doctrine. The courts also have restricted church workers’ ability to unionize. The Supreme Court ruled in 1979 [3] that the National Labor Relations Act, which forces employers to allow union organizing and accept collective bargaining, did not cover lay teachers in church-run schools.

Conservative Catholics are fond of saying the church is not a democracy. And yet in other contexts, the Catholic Church has affirmed the dignity of work and the rights of workers. In a pastoral letter published in 1986, titled “Economic Justice for All [4],” the bishops voiced approval for unions, fair wages, and “reasonable security against arbitrary dismissal.” As Horton pointed out, “They speak a great talk of justice for the world, but in their own church they don’t recognize it.”

Photograph by Getty Creative Images.

[church autonomy doctrine](#) [gender](#) [ministerial exception](#) [News & Politics](#) [Religion](#)

Source URL: <http://www.doublex.com/section/news-politics/why-catholic-church-firing-women>

Links:

[1] <http://www.doublex.com/users/claire-bushey>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/1402>

[3] <http://supreme.justia.com/us/440/490/case.html>

[4] http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx

[5] <http://www.doublex.com/section/news-politics/does-rick-warren's-church-condone-domestic-violence>

[6] <http://www.doublex.com/section/life/why-do-more-women-men-still-believe-god>

[7] <http://www.doublex.com/section/news-politics/katha-pollitt-still-second-sex>