

# **St. Norbert's 'Contradiction'**

## **Green Bay Bishop Criticizes College's Allowing Pro-Abortion Feminist Gloria Steinem to Speak**

by Jonathan Liedl

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Bishop David Ricken didn't criticize St. Norbert College's (SNC) decision to host pro-abortion feminist Gloria Steinem when the announcement was first made on Sept. 29, 2014. But that's only because he wasn't made aware of it. Now, after receiving a steady stream of complaints from concerned Catholics in the Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., Bishop Ricken has left no doubt about where he stands on SNC's invitation to the feminist activist, who once said that Planned Parenthood was the most important organization in the world. "I do not approve of the appearance of Gloria Steinem at St. Norbert College," Bishop Ricken wrote in his Jan. 8 column in the diocesan publication *The Compass*. The bishop noted that he has conveyed "his strong disapproval" to the abbot, president and the chair of the board of trustees of the small Norbertine liberal arts college located in De Pere, Wis.

The bishop's concern centers on Steinem's history as a supporter — and user — of abortion. Steinem has publicly shared that she had an abortion when she was 22, and she said in a 2011 interview that the abortion "felt positive." In a 2013 interview with *The Washington Post*, Steinem reiterated that "[abortion] should be a part of reproductive rights." "Her whole career and life is a grand affirmation of the pro-abortion movement," Bishop Ricken wrote. A petition against Steinem's appearance, sponsored by the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, has reportedly been signed by 26,000 people. Steinem is slated to speak at SNC's Cassandra Voss Center on April 21 as part of the weeklong residency of activist Bell Hooks. Hooks, who herself is also an advocate of abortion rights, invited Steinem to give a presentation on the subject of domestic violence.

### **Inappropriate Invitation**

While Bishop Ricken agrees that domestic violence is an "extremely important topic" that "needs consideration and attention by society and church," he finds the selection of Steinem to speak on the subject "quite mystifying." The bishop argued that abortion rights and the feminist agenda are actually linked to an increase in domestic violence in the past 40 years, and he called Steinem's simultaneous support of abortion rights and opposition to domestic violence "an internal self-contraction."

"One cannot protest domestic violence outside the womb and be in favor of violence and denial of life in the home of the womb," the bishop wrote in his column. "Therefore, the good [Steinem] might be doing is seriously compromised by her own positions and actions." Bishop Ricken underscored that even though Steinem's presentation will not be addressing abortion rights explicitly, the connection of abortion rights to the feminist agenda is a "sad one" that calls into question the logic behind her invitation. "For some reason, the SNC leadership community cannot see or does not want to admit this internal contradiction," Bishop Ricken added.

### **Church-College Relationship**

In his column, Bishop Ricken defended his role in intervening in affairs at St. Norbert College. "As bishop," he wrote, "I have the responsibility to ensure the Catholic identity of the Catholic colleges in our diocese." However, his perspective on the role of the bishop in Catholic higher education is not shared by SNC administrators. "Obviously, we have a somewhat different view of the question of speakers on a college campus, but we respect [Bishop Ricken's] desire to comment on something he feels so strongly about," St. Norbert College spokesman Mike Counter told the Register, and he noted that SNC is proud of its "116-year record as a Catholic institution." But according to Patrick Reilly of the Cardinal Newman Society, SNC "adds insult to injury by disregarding Bishop Ricken." "The local bishop is the arbiter of faith and morals, as well as a college's Catholic identity," said Reilly, the president of the Manassas, Va.-based organization dedicated to promoting and defending faithful Catholic education. "He doesn't simply 'feel strongly' about the faith; he has given his life to a calling from God to be successor of the apostles."

Reilly says SNC's misunderstanding of the role of the local bishop in Catholic higher education is reflective of a mistaken conception of true academic freedom that requires the academic commitment to truth. "As Pope St. John

Paul II explained, there's no freedom in rejecting truth, teaching known falsehood or acting in a way that is contrary to human dignity and the common good," said Reilly. Reilly also pointed to Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 address on Catholic higher education that was delivered to educators at The Catholic University of America. In the address, Pope Benedict reaffirmed the "great value of academic freedom" as the search for truth, but also warned that "any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission." Reilly believes that SNC's invitation of Steinem is going against a nationwide trend in the opposite direction. "Most Catholic colleges around the country have moved toward more responsible policies for selecting speakers," said Reilly. "Not quite what the Cardinal Newman Society might advise, but it's slowly getting better."

### **Church Offers More**

According to Bishop Ricken, one of the most disappointing aspects of the Steinem invitation is that it favored "outdated, tired and confused" secular approaches to women's issues over the "fresh" and "life-giving" approaches of the Catholic Church and speakers who uphold Catholic teaching. "It would be so refreshing if we heard the leadership and faculty use these new voices to help our young people live a life of integrity and holiness and to truly embrace life and peace for the most innocent of us all," the bishop wrote, while also calling upon SNC to embrace the entirety of Catholic teaching. According to Reilly, SNC fails to do so at its own peril. "Ultimately, a college that regards its Catholic label as more or less of a restriction is going to fail at Catholic education," he said. "But a number of Catholic colleges have taken their mission to form young people in the faith quite seriously, and the results are marvelous."

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