

Wisconsin dispute exposes Catholic split on unions

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) The fierce budget battle in Wisconsin that's pitting unions against Republican Gov. Scott Walker has also pitted the state's top Roman Catholic bishops against each other in a series of public exchanges over the church's historic support for unions.

The war of words -- however polite -- has exposed a longstanding rift between the church's progressive and conservative wings, reopened in the birthplace of the modern labor movement.

Walker's budget-repair bill requires public employees to pay more for their pensions and health care, and restricts collective bargaining power for most. The plan has prompted impassioned protests by thousands at the state capitol in Madison, and sent Democratic lawmakers into exile to prevent a vote.

Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. Listecky kicked it off with a statement on Feb. 16 that, quoting Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, said it was "a mistake to marginalize or dismiss unions as impediments to economic growth."

A week later, Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison issued his own statement, emphasizing the church's neutrality. That same day, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops publicly sided with Listecky, praising him for his "clear statement."

Morlino, writing in his diocesan newspaper, The Catholic Herald, said he and the statewide Wisconsin Catholic Conference were neutral, even though the Catholic Church has long sided with the rights of unionized workers.

"The question to which the dilemma boils down is rather simple on its face: Is the sacrifice which union members, including school

teachers, are called upon to make proportionate to the relative sacrifice called for from all in difficult economic times?" Morlino wrote.

"The teaching of the church allows for persons of good will to disagree as to which horn of this dilemma should be chosen because there would be reasonable justification available for either alternative."

To be sure, Morlino has emerged as a hero of the Catholic right. In the heat of the 2008 campaign, he blasted vice presidential nominee Joe Biden and then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi for "stepping on the pope's turf -- and mine" in appealing to church fathers for their support of abortion rights.

In 2009, Morlino fired a female church worker for using male and female imagery for God in her 2003 Master's thesis.

Morlino argued that unions should not be subjected to the decision of political parties or be too closely linked with them. Conservative Catholic activists soon rushed to Morlino's defense, with the Rev. Robert Sirico of the Michigan-based Acton Institute praising him as a "model of clarity" in the fractious debate.

"It is also useful to keep in mind that the Catholic position on unions is not an endorsement of all unions, in all places at all times and under every circumstance," Sirico wrote at Catholicvote.org.

The Rev. Bryan N. Massingale, associate professor of theological ethics at Marquette University in Milwaukee, doesn't necessarily see a conflict between Morlino and ListECKi -- at least from the statements.

"That's not the way Catholic bishops tend to operate," he said. "They tend to want to present a unified public voice."

But Michael Fleet, a political scientist at Marquette, sees it differently.

"Obviously (Morlino) wouldn't have written (his letter) unless some clarification or reframing was necessary," he said. "If you think about it, Morlino would write a short letter if he agreed with ListECKi, but

he wrote a longer letter articulating how (Listecki's statement) should be understood."

For their part, priests in Listecki's archdiocese sided with their archbishop. The Milwaukee Archdiocese Priests Alliance released a statement Feb. 25, that noticeably made no mention of Morlino's statement in calling for the governor to restore collective bargaining rights for the unions.

This article was corrected on March 1.