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Pope removes bishop who expressed openness to ordaining women

By Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY, May. 02, 2011 -- Pope Benedict XVI has removed Australian Bishop William M. Morris of Toowoomba from office five years after he wrote a pastoral letter indicating he would be open to ordaining women and married men if church rules changed to allow such a possibility. In an open letter to Catholics in his diocese released May 1, Bishop Morris said the 2006 letter "has been misread and, I believe, deliberately misinterpreted" by a small group within the diocese. In a brief statement May 2, the Vatican said, "The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has relieved His Excellency Msgr. William M. Morris of the pastoral care of the Diocese of Toowoomba." The formulation indicated that Bishop Morris had not offered his letter of resignation.

The Vatican did not explain the pope's decision, but in the past has made it clear that the Catholic Church considers it a matter of faith that Jesus chose only men to be his apostles and, therefore, the church is not free to ordain women. In addition, it has affirmed that while exceptional cases exist, celibacy is the norm for priests in the Latin rite. In his open letter, Bishop Morris said misunderstandings about his pastoral letter on the diocese's serious priest shortage led Pope Benedict to appoint U.S. Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver to conduct an apostolic visitation of the Toowoomba diocese.

"I have never seen the report prepared by the apostolic visitor," Bishop Morris said, and "without due process it has been impossible to resolve these matters, denying me natural justice without any possibility of appropriate defense and advocacy on my behalf." The bishop said the fact that there would be no further hearing on the matter was confirmed by a letter he received from the pope, which stated: "Canon law does not make provision for a process regarding bishops, whom the successor of Peter nominates and may remove from office." Bishop Morris said he did not offer to resign as "a matter of conscience" because "my resignation would mean that I accept the assessment of myself as breaking 'communio,' which I absolutely refute and reject."

The text of Morris' letter explaining this is here: http://ncrnews.org/documents/+BillMorrisLtr.pdf

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