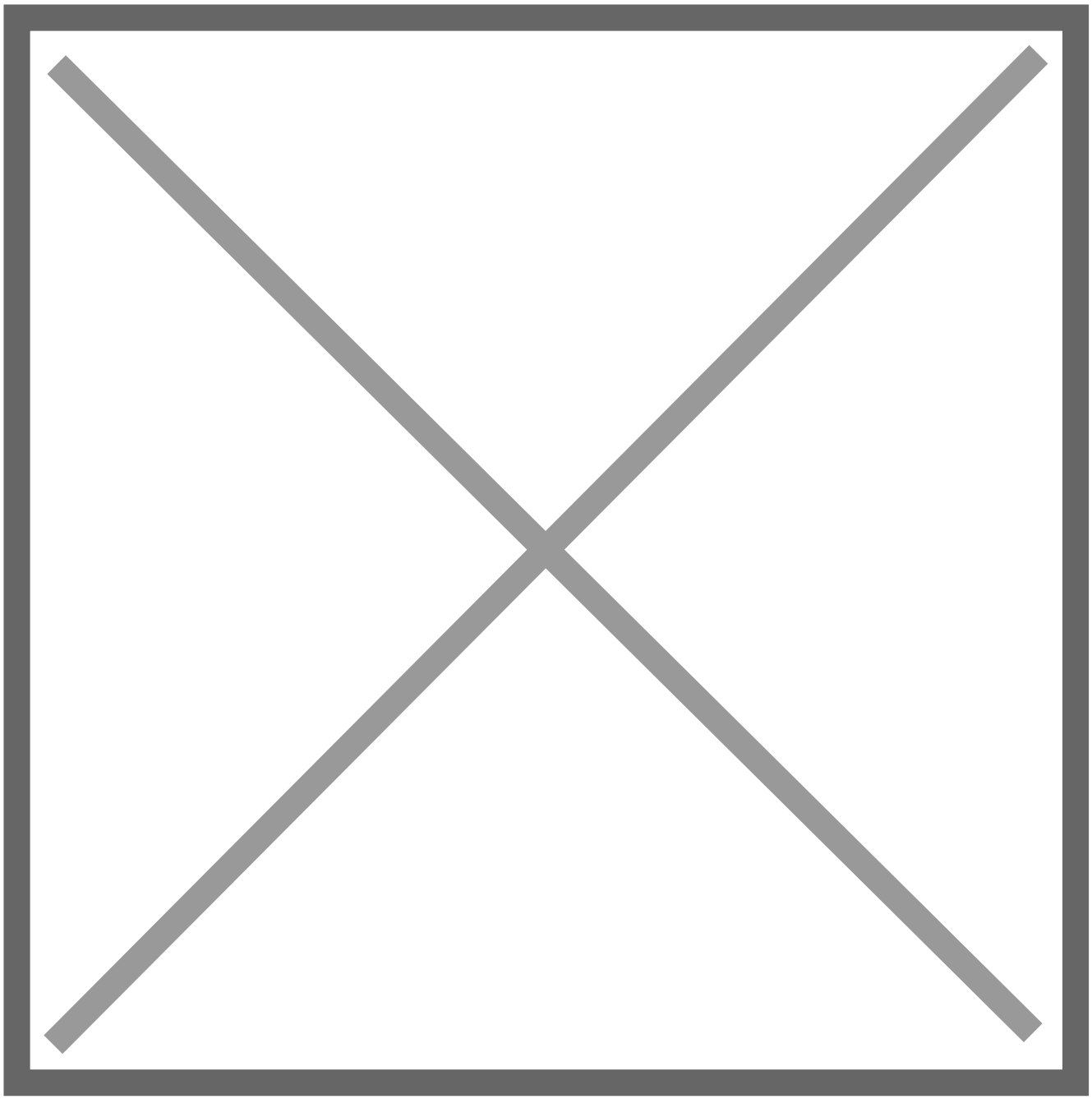
News



Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, speaks during a Nov. 17, 2021, session of the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. Rhoades is speaking out against the University of Notre Dame's decision to appoint Susan Ostermann, who supports keeping abortion legal, as director of the university's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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South Bend, Ind. — February 13, 2026
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An Indiana bishop is urging the University of Notre Dame to halt the appointment of a faculty member, who advocates openly for abortion, as head of one of the school's research centers.

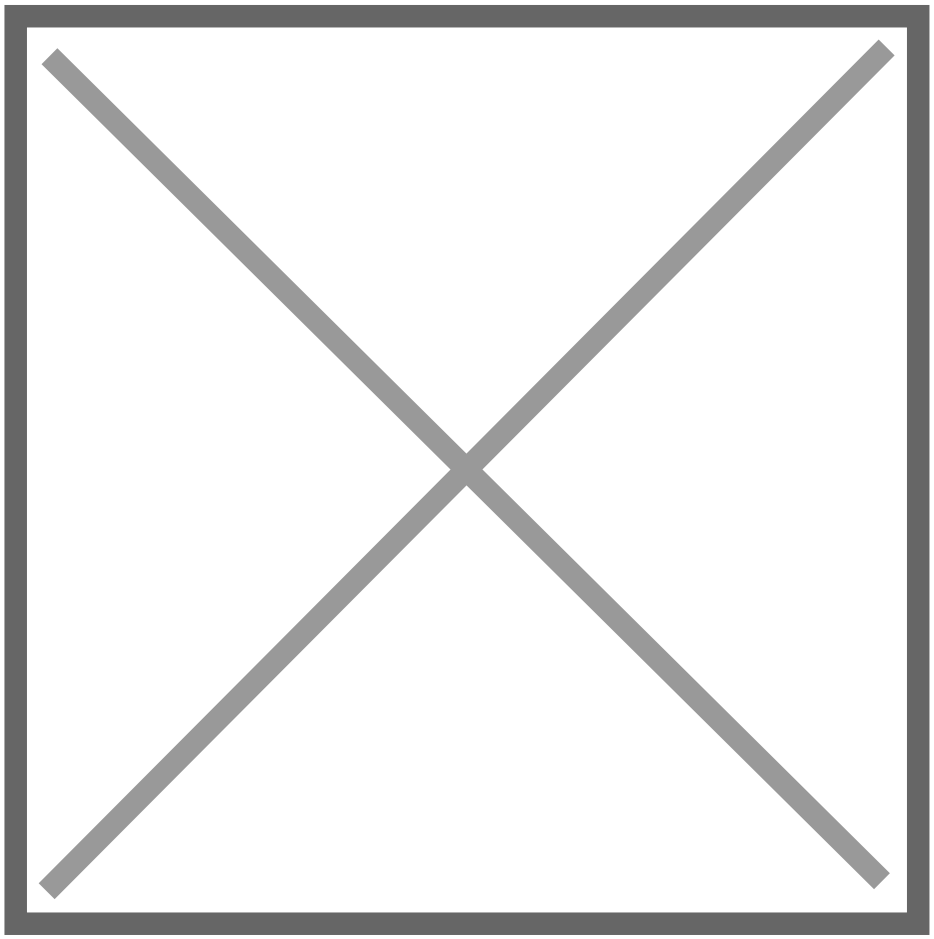
The matter highlights the role of Catholic universities in the life of the Church, as delineated in St. John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, for which the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a particular application in 1999.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, issued a Feb. 11 statement expressing "dismay" and "strong opposition" to the university's appointment of associate professor Susan Ostermann as director of the Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, effective July 1. Notre Dame is located adjacent to South Bend, Indiana, the state's fourth largest city.

The institute is part of the university's Keough School of Global Affairs, of which Ostermann — who specializes in the study of regulatory compliance, comparative politics and environmental regulation, with a focus on South Asia — is a faculty member.

The appointment, announced on Jan. 8, has drawn fire from Notre Dame faculty and staff due to Ostermann's robust public endorsement of legal abortion, and her work as a consultant for the Population Council, an international research and policy firm that works to advance "sexual and reproductive health, rights and choices" as a key aim. At least two Notre Dame faculty members, professor Diane Desierto and emeritus professor Robert Gimello, resigned their roles at the Liu Institute in protest, according to The Observer, Notre Dame's student-run newspaper.

As of Feb. 13, at least nine bishops, including Archbishop Paul Coakley, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have expressed their support for Rhoades' statement. They include recently retired Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver, Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco; Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota; Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska; Bishop Donald Hying of Madison, Wisconsin; Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas; Bishop David Ricken of Green Bay, Wisconsin; and Bishop James Wall of Gallup, New Mexico.



The University of Notre Dame announced Jan. 8, 2026, that Susan Ostermann, who supports keeping abortion legal, has been appointed as director of the university's Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies. Ostermann is pictured in a Sept. 16, 2021, photo. (OSV News /University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

In his statement, Rhoades said Ostermann's "extensive public advocacy of abortion rights and her disparaging and inflammatory remarks about those who uphold the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death go against a core principle of justice that is central to Notre Dame's Catholic identity and mission."

Bishop Rhoades — noting he had read "many of the op-ed pieces co-authored by Professor Ostermann — said the appointment was "causing scandal to the faithful of our diocese and beyond."

In one such piece, published by the Chicago Tribune in December 2022, Ostermann and former faculty colleague Tamara Kay (who left Notre Dame for the University of Pittsburgh, following outcry over her endorsement of legalized abortion) surveyed "lies about abortion" that have "dictated public policy."

Among those lies, wrote Ostermann and Kay, was that "abortion kills babies."

"Almost 90% of abortions occur during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy when there are no babies or fetuses. There are only blastocysts or embryos so tiny they are too small to be seen on an abdominal ultrasound," wrote Ostermann and Kay.

The same article also described crisis pregnancy centers as "anti-abortion rights propaganda sites" that "operate and provide false information to women who are lured to them believing they will receive legitimate medical care."

Ostermann and Kay further asserted that "women who are denied an abortion experience a panoply of negative outcomes physically, mentally and occupationally."

Rhoades quoted additional writings by Ostermann in his statement, noting she had claimed the pro-life position has "its roots in white supremacy and racism," with misogyny "embedded" in the movement."

"She also argued that the Catholic social doctrine of 'integral human development' supports abortion because it enhances freedom and flourishing for women," said Rhoades.

"These are all outrageous claims that should disqualify her from an administrative and leadership role at a Catholic university," he said. "I hope that Professor Ostermann will explicitly retract these claims, and I pray that she will have a change of mind and heart that will lead her to affirm the innate dignity of unborn babies as well as that of their mothers."

In a statement provided to OSV News, Ostermann said that her "primary focus is to serve as a steward for the Liu Institute mission in the context of the University's larger mission, and a facilitator for our world-class faculty.

"I am fully committed to maintaining an environment of academic freedom where a plurality of voices can flourish," she said. "I have long worked with scholars who hold diverse views on a multitude of issues, and I welcome the opportunity to continue doing so. While I hold my own convictions on complex social and legal issues, I want to be clear: my role is to support the diverse research of our scholars and students, not to advance a personal political agenda."

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"This commitment to academic inquiry and mutual respect is deeply rooted in my appreciation for Notre Dame's identity as a global Catholic research university," Ostermann continued. "I am inspired by the University's focus on Integral Human Development, which calls us to promote the dignity and flourishing of every person. I respect Notre Dame's institutional position on the sanctity of life at every stage. By fostering a collaborative space that values rigorous inquiry, we contribute in important ways to global development and human well-being. As Liu Director, I look forward to working closely with my colleagues to ensure the Liu Institute remains a place where truth is pursued with both excellence and integrity."

In his statement, Rhoades cited a Nov. 15, 2014, address by Pope Francis in which the late pontiff denounced "false compassion which holds that it is a benefit to women to promote abortion."

"The church here in our diocese and around the world serves mothers before and after birth, providing spiritual, emotional and material care to moms in need," said Rhoades. "The church stands for the inalienable right to life of mothers and their unborn children."

Rhoades said that "Notre Dame has publicly committed as a Catholic institution to the life and dignity of the human person," affirming the church's teaching that "human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception," as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states.

"I am proud of Notre Dame's pro-life commitment, manifest in the large number of students and faculty who promote a culture of life through many campus organizations, programs, and activities," Rhoades said. "They witness to the sanctity of life at every stage, with special attention to the lives of the vulnerable, including the unborn, the poor, immigrants, the elderly and the infirm."

He stressed that "the Catholic Church upholds a consistent ethic of life," pointing to Pope Leo XIV's recent citation of St. Teresa of Calcutta's address at the National Prayer Breakfast in February 1994, in which she said "the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion."

Rhoades also quoted Leo, who in a Jan. 31 address observed that "no policy can genuinely serve the people if it denies the unborn the gift of life, or if it neglects to support those in need whether in their material circumstances or in their spiritual distress."

Rhoades said that "this pro-life principle is not merely affirmed by Catholics; it is embraced by many people of good will of diverse backgrounds and commitments around the world."

With the Keough Institute endorsing integral human development as the primary Catholic social teaching principle for its work, said Rhoades, "Professor Ostermann has written — ludicrously — that this Catholic principle actually supports abortion on demand."

Yet the Holy See has repeatedly affirmed to the United Nations that the inherent right to life is central to integral human development, said the bishop.

"Professor Ostermann's opposite view thus clearly should disqualify her from holding a position of leadership within the Keough School," he said.

He added that Ostermann's consultancy for the Population Council was another disqualifier for the Liu Institute appointment, since the council is "dedicated to the promotion of abortion around the world, "linked to China's population control policies that have resulted in hundreds of millions of abortions of baby girls," and "instrumental in securing approval of the abortion pill by the FDA, which is responsible for the majority of abortions in the United States."

"Some may claim that this appointment should be protected by academic freedom," said Rhoades noted.

However, he said, "Academic freedom concerns the liberty of faculty to conduct research according to their own professional judgment and interests.

"This appointment, by contrast, concerns the official administrative appointment to lead an academic unit," he said. "Such appointments have profound impact on the integrity of Notre Dame's public witness as a Catholic university."

Ostermann's appointment as the head of the Liu Institute "understandably creates confusion in the public mind as to Notre Dame's fidelity to its Catholic mission," said Rhoades, adding that "many faculty, students, alumni, and benefactors of Notre Dame have reached out to me to express their shock, sadness, confusion and disappointment" over the move.

Rhoades urged prayer, particularly to the Virgin Mary under her title Our Lady of Lourdes, asking her to intercede so that "Notre Dame will always stand firm in her commitment to the Gospel of her Son, the Gospel of Life."

He cited *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which names the local bishop as having particular responsibility to promote and assist in preserving the Catholic identity of Catholic universities within a given diocese.

"I call upon the leadership of Notre Dame to rectify this situation," said Rhoades. "The appointment of Professor Ostermann is not scheduled to go into effect until July 1, 2026. There is still time to make things right."

This story has been updated to add list of bishops supporting Bishop Kevin Rhoades' statement.