Vatican



Spanish Archbishop Luis Ladaria is prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Jesuit theologian is pictured at a 2015 Vatican press conference. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Irish Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery has been prohibited from publicly celebrating Mass for nearly six years. The Vatican's doctrinal congregation suspended him from ministry in February 2012 after he refused to revise some views he had expressed in a religious magazine run by his order.

In mid-January, Flannery turned 70. He announced he would violate his suspension for the first time in order to celebrate a public Mass of thanksgiving for those who had offered him support through the last few years.

The priest, a popular writer, retreat giver and former pastor, gave the decision a lot of thought. He figured that once he violated his suspension, he could expect further penalties from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, perhaps even, at the most extreme, removal from the priesthood.

Yet in an interview in early August, Flannery said he had heard nothing: No word had come from his bishop, his religious superior, or the Vatican. He's drawn a conclusion about what it might mean about the influence of the doctrinal congregation under Pope Francis as compared to previous pontiffs.

"I've interpreted that as a very good indication that [the congregation] haven't got the power that they had," said the priest. "Because if that was five years ago, there is no doubt, I think, that they'd have come down heavy on me."

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While Flannery's conclusion is anecdotal, it conveys an observation being spoken about with more regularity in Rome and around the world. The once all-powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, appears to have gone nearly silent.

In past decades, the doctrinal office was known for taking a proactive stance towards theological investigations, hunting out Catholic priests or academics who might be straying over any doctrinal lines. The office was also known for its regular promulgation of official documents.

But it appears both of those public functions have been pared down in dramatic ways.

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Four theologians on two continents known to have been investigated by the doctrinal office in the past five years all said in recent interviews they have heard nothing more from the congregation since Francis' election in March 2013.

"My response is simple," one of the theologians said in answer to an email inquiry. "I have had no contact."

The diminishment in the number of documents published by the doctrinal congregation under Francis has been simply dramatic.

During Pope Benedict XVI's 2005-13 reign, the doctrinal office issued 19 documents and 19 further accompanying statements. Five of the documents, including a formal critique of U.S. theologian Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, came in 2012 alone.



The exterior of the Vatican's Palace of the Holy Office, which houses the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. (NCR/ Joshua J. McElwee)

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Since Francis' election four years ago, the doctrinal office has only issued two documents.

The first of those issued under Francis came in June 2016 — more than three years after the pope's election — and dealt with the relationship between the church's bishops and the so-called charismatic movements. The second, issued in October 2016, widely just reaffirmed decades-old teachings about burial and cremation.

Francis appeared to downplay the role of the doctrinal congregation shortly after his election, when he reportedly told a group of nuns and priests with the Latin American Conference of Religious not to worry if they members found themselves the target of a theological investigation.

Pope Francis downplays threat of Vatican scrutiny of religious orders

"This will pass!" the pope was reported saying. "Perhaps even a letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine [of the Faith] will arrive for you, telling you that you said such or such thing. ... But do not worry. Explain whatever you have to explain, but move forward."

Cardinal Gerhard Müller served as the head of the doctrinal congregation from 2012 through July. Francis appointed Archbishop Luis Ladaria, formerly the office's second-in-command, as his replacement. Ladaria's appointment has been seen as indication Francis did not want a radical shake-up at the office, but simply a change in personnel.

Change in procedure

The congregation's theological investigations used to follow a fairly predictable pattern. Someone might notify a staff member of the doctrinal office about a theologian whose writing they found problematic. The office would consider the matter and then determine whether to investigate.

If the theologian under review were a member of a religious order, all contact from the congregation would go through their religious superior. The theologian would be told the issue was a matter of pontifical secret and that any discussion of it in public or with the press would result in further unspecified penalties.

In April 2016, a group of prominent global theologians, priests and bishops publicly called for the doctrinal office to adopt a new process for theological investigations that would be marked by openness instead of secrecy.

Benedict, who had led the doctrinal congregation from 1981 to 2005 as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was known as firm advocate of theological investigations. Under his leadership, the congregation took a decidedly proactive stance in defining church teaching and in criticizing or warning theologians.

Among theologians formally criticized during Ratzinger's tenure at the office were: Sri Lankan Oblate Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, Australian Sacred Heart Fr. Paul Collins, Indian Jesuit Fr. Anthony de Mello, Belgian Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis, and U.S. Jesuit Fr. Roger Haight.

Flannery detailed his ordeal with the doctrinal congregation in his 2013 book *A Question of Conscience*. He said he was told to publicly revise some of the views expressed in his columns for Reality magazine or risk suspension of his ability to minister.

The priest maintained silence about the investigation, as requested, for a year, until revealing publicly in January 2013 that he was facing the threat of excommunication. While Flannery offered the doctrinal congregation a statement of clarification of his views, they requested that he also publish a statement that women would never be ordained as priests.

The priest refused the latter request and has been formally barred from ministry since.



Fr. Brian D'Arcy is pictured in a BBC publicity shot from the documentary "The Turbulent Priest," broadcast in 2012. (Natalie Maynes/BBC NI 'The Turbulent Priest')

Passionist Fr. Brian D'Arcy, a popular newspaper columnist, radio broadcaster and pastor from Northern Ireland, related a similar experience to the one described by Flannery to conclude that the doctrinal office has lost power under Francis.

The doctrinal congregation censured D'Arcy in 2011. While the priest says he is still unclear exactly what he said to cause the censure, he said he was told it had to do with columns he had written for the Sunday World newspaper.

The congregation asked the priest to submit all future writings through a church censor for adherence to church teaching. D'Arcy said he agreed to follow the request, but only on articles he wrote concerning matters of faith and morals.

Related: 'God's Rottweiler' silenced many as head of doctrinal congregation

In September 2016, D'Arcy gave a lengthy interview to Hot Press, a Northern Irish magazine akin to Rolling Stone. Asked about whether same-sex marriage should be legal in his country, the priest expressed dissatisfaction with the church's teaching

on homosexuality.

D'Arcy said he was informed later by the head of the Passionists in Rome that someone had reported the interview to the doctrinal congregation for possible theological investigation. The priest said his superior had received a note from the doctrinal congregation informing the order of the report.

"Nothing happened about it," said D'Arcy. "It was a statement of the fact that it'd been reported, but there was no censure attached to it."

The priest expressed a sentiment that others who have been under investigation by the Vatican may share. Asked if he wanted more clarity from the congregation about his situation, D'Arcy responded: "I want to hear nothing more from them."

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