Vatican



In this 2013 file photo, Capuchin Franciscan Fr. Thomas Weinandy is pictured at the Washington headquarters of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops where he served as chief adviser on doctrinal and canonical affairs. (CNS/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

by Dennis Coday

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After releasing a statement questioning the teachings of Pope Francis, the former head of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee has resigned as a consultant to the bishops and the president of the U.S. bishops' conference has released a statement asserting the conference is "in strong unity with and loyalty to the Holy Father."

Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, who served as executive director for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Doctrine from 2005 to 2013, revealed Nov. 1 that he had written a letter to Pope Francis in July saying that "a chronic confusion seems to mark your pontificate."

The letter, which was printed on several websites Nov. 1, notes that the pope is "commissioned by the Lord himself to promote and strengthen [the church's] unity. But your actions and words too often seem intent on doing the opposite."

"Ironically, your pontificate has given those who hold harmful theological and pastoral views the license and confidence to come into the light and expose their previously hidden darkness," Weinandy wrote.

Weinanday said in a statement released the morning of Nov. 1 that after waiting months for a response from the pope and not receiving one he chose to make his letter public.

By late afternoon on Nov. 1, James Rogers, chief communications officer for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, released a statement announcing that Weinandy had "resigned, effective immediately, from his position as consultant to the USCCB Committee on Doctrine."

Several minutes later Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, issued his own statement saying that "the publication of [Weinandy's] letter to Pope Francis gives us an opportunity to reflect on the nature of dialogue within the Church."

"Throughout the history of the Church, ministers, theologians and the laity all have debated and have held personal opinions on a variety of theological and pastoral issues," DiNardo wrote. "In more recent times, these debates have made their way

into the popular press. That is to be expected and is often good."

"As Bishops, we recognize the need for honest and humble discussions around theological and pastoral issue," DiNardo continues and cites St. Ignatius of Loyola "… that it should be presumed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it."

"This presupposition should be afforded all the more to the teaching of Our Holy Father," DiNardo's statement says.

He concludes his statement: "The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is a collegial body of bishops working towards that goal. As Pastors and Teachers of the Faith, therefore, let me assert that we always stand in strong unity with and loyalty to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who ‘is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful' (LG, no. 23)."

'The faithful grow uneasy'

In his letter, dated July 31, Weinandy writes that "the light of faith, hope, and love is not absent [from Francis' pontificate], but too often it is obscured by the ambiguity of your [Francis'] words and actions. This fosters within the faithful a growing unease. It compromises their capacity for love, joy and peace." He cites four examples:

- "First there is the disputed Chapter 8 of 'Amoris Laetitia.' I need not share my own concerns about its content. Others, not only theologians, but also cardinals and bishops, have already done that. The main source of concern is the manner of your teaching. In 'Amoris Laetitia,' your guidance at times seems intentionally ambiguous, thus inviting both a traditional interpretation of Catholic teaching on marriage and divorce as well as one that might imply a change in that teaching."
- "Second, too often your manner seems to demean the importance of Church doctrine. Again and again you portray doctrine as dead and bookish, and far from the pastoral concerns of everyday life."
- "Third, faithful Catholics can only be disconcerted by your choice of some bishops, men who seem not merely open to those who hold views counter to Christian belief but who support and even defend them."

- "Fourth ... Encouraging a form of 'synodality' that allows and promotes various doctrinal and moral options within the Church can only lead to more theological and pastoral confusion. Such synodality is unwise and, in practice, works against collegial unity among bishops."

Weinandy writes that although Francis often talks about transparency and openness and encourages "all persons, especially bishops, to speak their mind and not be fearful of what the pope may think," a fear runs through the body of the church.

"Have you noticed that the majority of bishops throughout the world are remarkably silent?" Weinandy asks, "Why is this? Bishops are quick learners, and what many have learned from your pontificate is not that you are open to criticism, but that you resent it. Many bishops are silent because they desire to be loyal to you, and so they do not express – at least publicly; privately is another matter – the concerns that your pontificate raises. Many fear that if they speak their mind, they will be marginalized or worse."

He concludes his letter: "Holy Father, I pray for you constantly and will continue to do so. May the Holy Spirit lead you to the light of truth and the life of love so that you can dispel the darkness that now hides the beauty of Jesus' Church."

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Weinandy's tenure as executive director of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee was marked with controversy. Some said it was marked by "prosecutorial zeal."

Under his leadership the committee issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians: St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a theologian on the faculty at Fordham University, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, both theologians at Creighton University, Daniel Maguire, a medical and ecological ethicist at Marquette University, and Peter Phan, a Georgetown University theologian and Vietnam native known for his work bridging theological currents in Asia and the West.

The doctrine committee under Weinandy was widely criticized -- including both of the leading membership societies of U.S. theologians -- because they came without pursuing consultation or dialogue with the theologians.

The 900-member College Theology Society even issued a statement in December 2011, saying the doctrine committee had caused a "fundamental breach" in the call

for dialogue in the church and had wounded the "entire community of Catholic theologians."

When Weinandy left the office in 2013, Susan Ross, then president of the 1,400-member Catholic Theological Society of America, told NCR that Weinandy's time at the bishops' conference was antagonistic.

"The committee on doctrine has taken a much more adversarial position towards theologians during the time of [Weinandy's] tenure as executive secretary," said Ross, who teaches theology at Loyola University of Chicago.

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Weinandy had sought a 'sign'

Weinandy published a "note of explanation" on The Catholic World Report website Nov. 1 that describes that he wrote the letter to Francis after praying for and receiving a sign from God.

He writes in the note that in May he was in Rome to attend a meeting of the International Theological Commission, of which he is a member. (The Vatican website still had his name listed as a member of the commission as of Nov. 2.) He describes how he spent most of a Sunday afternoon in prayer in St. Peter's Basilica.

"I was beseeching Jesus and Mary, St. Peter and all of the saintly popes who are buried there to do something to rectify the confusion and turmoil within the Church today, a chaos and an uncertainty that I felt Pope Francis had himself caused. I was also pondering whether or not I should write and publish something expressing my concerns and anxiety."

He returned to St. Peter's three days later and "prayed in the same manner."

"That night I could not get to sleep, which is very unusual for me," he continues. "It was due to all that was on my mind pertaining to the Church and Pope Francis. At 1:15 a.m. I got up and went outside for short time. When I went back to my room, I said to the Lord: ‘If you want me to write something, you have to give me a clear sign.' "

The sign he asked for was to meet up the next day with an old friend, no individual in particular, but an old friend whom he had not seen for a very longtime who would say to him, "Keep up the good writing."

Weinandy writes that he did meet an old friend unexpectedly the next day outside a street café in Rome who told him to "keep up the good writing." Weinandy writes that he took this as "Jesus fulfilling my demanding 'sign.' "

He wrote the letter to Francis and although he received an acknowledgement from the Vatican Secretariat of State informing him that the letter had been received, it "was not a response to my concerns," so he decided to make his letter to Francis public.

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The full text of the statement from Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, follows:

“The departure today of Fr. Thomas Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap., as a consultant to the Committee on Doctrine and the publication of his letter to Pope Francis gives us an opportunity to reflect on the nature of dialogue within the Church. Throughout the history of the Church, ministers, theologians and the laity all have debated and have held personal opinions on a variety of theological and pastoral issues. In more recent times, these debates have made their way into the popular press. That is to be expected and is often good. However, these reports are often expressed in terms of opposition, as political – conservative vs. liberal, left vs. right, pre-Vatican II vs Vatican II. These distinctions are not always very helpful.

Christian charity needs to be exercised by all involved. In saying this, we all must acknowledge that legitimate differences exist, and that it is the work of the Church, the entire body of Christ, to work towards an ever-growing understanding of God’s truth.

As Bishops, we recognize the need for honest and humble discussions around theological and pastoral issues. We must always keep in mind St. Ignatius of Loyola’s "presupposition" to his Spiritual Exercises: "…that it should be presumed

that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it." This presupposition should be afforded all the more to the teaching of Our Holy Father.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is a collegial body of bishops working towards that goal. As Pastors and Teachers of the Faith, therefore, let me assert that we always stand in strong unity with and loyalty to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (LG, no. 23)."

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