News
Vatican
The façade of the Vatican's Palace of the Holy Office, where the Congregation for the Doctrine

The façade of the Vatican's Palace of the Holy Office, where the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is located, pictured in 2019 (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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A popular Irish priest suspended from public ministry in 2012 primarily over his support for women's ordination is now being threatened by the Vatican that his suspension will remain indefinite unless he signs four strict oaths of fidelity to Catholic teachings.

Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery revealed to NCR Sept. 15 that he had received a letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over the summer. It asks him to affirm the church's official positions on a male-only priesthood, gay relationships, civil unions and gender identity.

The document, sent on congregational letterhead and signed by the office's second-in-command, Archbishop Giacomo Morandi, informs the Redemptorist leadership in Rome that Flannery "should not return to public ministry" if the priest does not sign the four attached oaths.

Flannery told NCR he believes he cannot sign the materials in good conscience, and expects this may be "the end of the road" for him in terms of public ministry.

"To sign that document would be utterly ridiculous for me," said the priest. "That document is so far removed from where I am at now, and it is phrased in such a way that there is no possibility of dialogue of any nature."

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Flannery is a popular Irish writer, retreat giver and, formerly, pastor. He was removed from public ministry in February 2012 after the Vatican congregation expressed concern over a number of columns he had written for Reality, a Redemptorist-run magazine in Ireland.

The priest's continued suspension appears at odds with Pope Francis' frequent calls for a church that is more open to dialogue and debate. During the four Synods of Bishops Francis has hosted over his seven-year papacy, for example, the pontiff has frequently exhorted the prelates attending those events that no topic should be off the table.

The first oath Flannery is asked to sign concerns women's ordination. The text presents a "doctrinal proposition" that "a baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly." It then asks the priest to sign that he has decided to "submit" to that proposition.



Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery (Provided photo)

The other three oaths ask Flannery to affirm that "homosexual practices are contrary to the natural law;" that forms of union between partners outside marriage "do not

correspond to God's plan for marriage and family;" and that "gender theory is not accepted by Catholic teaching."

Flannery said that while he has written and spoken with regard to issues around the first three oaths, the inclusion of the last one confused him.

"I don't think I have ever written a line on gender theory," said the priest, joking: "I'd want to study up and know what exactly it was before I'd even begin to."

The letter from the Vatican congregation, which is addressed to the head of the Redemptorist order, Fr. Michael Brehl, references a previous February 2020 letter from Brehl. The Congregation says the previous letter proposed "permitting Fr. Tony Flannery to return to public ministry."

Brehl did not immediately respond to a request for comment on this story. The Vatican congregation, which is led by Cardinal Luis Ladaria, also did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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After reviewing the documents related to the case, one respected canon lawyer, who asked not to be named, said it appeared the Vatican was "throwing the book" at Flannery.

The Vatican's letter does not indicate that Flannery would be immediately returned to ministry should he sign the four oaths. Instead, it promises that after the priest's signing, "a gradual readmission of Fr. Flannery to the exercise of public ministry will be made possible by way of an agreement with this congregation."

The letter also suggests that if Flannery were to return to ministry, "he should be asked to not speak publicly" on the four matters covered by the provided oaths.

Flannery said he had not sought canonical advice on the latest letter.

"After even the most cursory of a first glance at [the letter], it was obvious to me there was no way that I was going to sign any of that," said the priest. "I would assume … they would have known well that I wasn't going to sign it.

Flannery, whose latest book, *From the Outside: Rethinking Church Doctrine*, is being published in October, said the idea of returning to ministry but being barred from speaking on certain subjects was not appealing.

"I'm 73 years of age, and going through that process — there'd be no life in it," he said.

"I suppose what I'm doing now, going public on this, is saying, 'Look, forget it. I don't want to have any more to do with the CDF,' " said the priest, using an acronym for the Vatican congregation. "I just want to live what I have left of my life."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

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