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Pope Francis greets Cardinal Luis Ladaria, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, during a meeting with members of the International Theological Commission at the Vatican Nov. 29, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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The head of the Vatican's powerful doctrinal congregation Sept. 22 defended his office's request that an Irish priest sign four strict oaths of fidelity to Catholic teachings, saying the move, while "very unpleasant," was part of the congregation's duty as the global church's orthodoxy watchdog.

Responding to a question from NCR about the case of Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, who has been suspended from ministry for eight years, primarily over his support for women's ordination, Cardinal Luis Ladaria said the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had done "everything possible" to dialogue with the priest.

"On some points, we have had to take some measures, which were never a judgment on the person, because this is left only to our Lord, but [a judgment] on his teachings or his behavior," said Ladaria.

"We have tried always to maintain our respect towards Fr. Flannery, but the duty that we have, according to the arrangement of the church, is to protect the faith and therefore to indicate some things that do not conform with this faith," said the cardinal.

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Ladaria was speaking during a Vatican press conference presenting a new document from his congregation regarding Catholic teaching on end-of-life issues.

Flannery revealed the Vatican's move against him to NCR on Sept. 15, releasing both a letter from the doctrinal congregation and four "doctrinal dispositions" he was asked to affirm. They regard the church's official positions on a male-only priesthood, gay relationships, civil unions and gender identity.

The original document, signed by the Vatican office's second-in-command, Archbishop Giacomo Morandi, informed the Redemptorist leadership in Rome that Flannery "should not return to public ministry" if the priest did not sign the four attached oaths.

In a brief phone interview following Ladaria's comments, Flannery said he was left "almost speechless" by the cardinal's characterization of a dialogue existing between him and the Vatican congregation.

Flannery said that during the eight years of his suspension, he had never received a direct communication from the congregation. In cases of involving persons who are members of religious communities, the congregation typically only corresponds with the person's religious superior.

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"It is so at variance of my experience of dealing with them," said Flannery. "At no stage in eight years have they ever communicated directly to me."

"I'm a bit thrown by the brazenness of what [Ladaria] says," said the priest. "It really has so little relation to reality."

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.

Ladaria said his congregation has a responsibility to enforce church teachings.

"This is a responsibility that is very unpleasant for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith," said the cardinal, repeating: "Very unpleasant."

"But it is our responsibility and it would be a lacking on our part if we did not exercise this responsibility, if we pushed it to the side and did not say something when some times, sadly, you have to," said Ladaria.

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