News



Left: Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois (CNS/Courtesy of Springfield Diocese); right: Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of San Diego (CNS/David Maung)



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In a provocative essay published Feb. 28 at First Things magazine, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, appears to accuse San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy of heresy, citing the cardinal's views on how the Catholic Church should minister to LGBTQ people and Catholics who have been divorced and remarried.

Paprocki, a hardline conservative prelate and canon lawyer, does not mention McElroy by name in the essay, but quotes directly from a Jan. 24 article the cardinal wrote at America magazine. Repeating a phrase in an October document from the Synod of Bishops, McElroy had called for a church that favors "radical inclusion" of everyone, including those whose personal situations may not strictly conform with church doctrine.

Referencing McElroy's critique of "a theology of eucharistic coherence that multiplies barriers to the grace and gift of the eucharist," Paprocki suggested in his First Things essay that until recently, it would have been "hard to imagine any successor of the apostles making such heterodox statements."

"Unfortunately, it is not uncommon today to hear Catholic leaders affirm unorthodox views that, not too long ago, would have been espoused only by heretics," Paprocki wrote in the essay, titled "Imagining a Heretical Cardinal."

Paprocki, who last November was elected chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, also cited several passages in the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and St. Pope John Paul II's 1998 apostolic letter *Ad Tuendam Fidem* ("To Protect the Faith"), to argue that anybody who denies "settled Catholic teaching" on issues like homosexuality and "embraces heresy" is automatically excommunicated from the church.

Citing canon law, Paprocki further argued that the pope has the authority, and the obligation, to remove a heretical cardinal from office, or dismiss him outright from the clerical state, or else risk "the unseemly prospect" of a cardinal who was excommunicated *latae sententiae* due to heresy voting in a papal conclave.

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McElroy and Paprocki were both not immediately available for comment at press time. In a Feb. 28 interview with The Pillar, Paprocki said he did not intend to single out a particular cardinal for criticism, and that he "intended the discussion to be more rhetorical."

"I think the reason I did this is because this debate has become so public at this point that it seems to have passed beyond the point of just some private conversations between bishops," Paprocki told The Pillar.

The bishop's explanation struck some observers as disingenuous.

"If I were to take him at face value, I would suggest that he have wise and prudent people read his essays before he publishes them," said Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, a journalist who has covered the U.S. bishops for decades.

Reese told NCR that Paprocki's essay reflects not only deep divisions in the U.S. Catholic hierarchy but also a level of public animosity, open disagreement and strident rhetoric among bishops that Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI would not have tolerated.

"On the other hand, there wouldn't have been this kind of discussion under John Paul II because the Vatican would have shut it down," said Reese, who added that Francis has encouraged open discussion on sensitive issues such as figuring out new ways to accompany LGBTQ Catholics and same-sex couples.

"Francis has opened the church up for discussion again and [conservative bishops] just don't like it. They're trying to shut it down by using this kind of inflammatory rhetoric, even against cardinals," Reese said.

Cathleen Kaveny, a law and theology professor at Boston College, told NCR that Paprocki "should know better as a canon lawyer" than to accuse someone of heresy, which she said is a formal charge. Canon 751 specifically defines heresy as the "obstinate denial or obstinate doubt ... of some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith."

"What [Paprocki] is doing is running together statements and teachings of different levels of authority in the church, and claiming that any disagreement with any of them amounts to heresy. And that's just false," Kaveny said.

As for McElroy's essay in America, Kaveny said she did not understand the cardinal's point to be that homosexual acts are not sinful: "I read him as saying that they don't automatically rise to the level of a mortal sin, and that seems to be the kind of development in our tradition that could take place.

"The underlying question in all of this is whether development in church doctrine can take place," Kaveny added. "I would recommend people read John Henry Newman on that, and look at the history of the church's teaching on usury while they're at it," she said, referencing the church's development over the centuries on whether it is acceptable to charge interest on loans.

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