A reporter with ABC News interviews Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, outside a

A reporter with ABC News interviews Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, outside a Baltimore hotel during the spring general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops June 12, 2019. (OSV News/CNS file/Bob Roller)



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Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, said he and Cardinal Robert McElroy "exchanged some emails" after the publication of Paprocki's controversial Feb. 28 essay at First Things magazine where he appeared to accuse the cardinal of heresy.

"We're hoping to continue a conversation with each other," Paprocki told NCR in a recent phone interview.

Paprocki declined to elaborate on that conversation, or to say whether he reached out to McElroy before writing the essay. A spokesman for McElroy said he was not available for comment.

"I don't want this to be focused on my personality or the personality of anybody else," Paprocki said.

In the 1,400-word essay, published with the headline "Imagining a Heretical Cardinal," Paprocki quoted directly from a Jan. 24 article that McElroy wrote at

America magazine in which he called for a "radical inclusion" of everyone, including those whose personal situations may not strictly conform with church doctrine.

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

Paprocki also cited canon law, papal documents and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to make the case for how a bishop could be automatically excommunicated for heresy, while also suggesting that a pope had an obligation to remove a cardinal from office or else risk the "unseemly" prospect of a heretical cardinal voting in a papal conclave.

Paprocki told NCR he intended the scenario of a heretical cardinal voting in a conclave to be theoretical, while adding that he would not be surprised if that has happened in the church's long history.

"The Holy Spirit can still guide a heretic in a sense in terms of how their vote is going," said Paprocki, who pushed back against concerns that his essay could further deepen the kind of polarization in the church that McElroy also wrote about in America.

"If there was no pushback to the Arian heresy, we'd all be Arians these days," Paprocki said in referencing a fourth-century controversy about Christ's divinity.

Paprocki also told NCR that bishops, theologians and lay Catholics had relayed their concerns to him in private about statements from church leaders in Europe and the United States that they thought could be heretical.

"While it may be painful, I think it's healthy in the long run to have these debates and to get some of these discussions out in the open," he said.

In a March 2 essay at America, McElroy responded to his critics, arguing that pastoral concerns for LGBTQ people or Catholics divorced and civilly remarried "cannot be eclipsed by doctrine."