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Wuerl defends stinging rebuke of theologian's book

by Thomas C. Fox



Cardinal Wuerl (CNS photo)

Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, April 18 sent a letter to the U.S. bishops outlining a fresh relationship between them and theologians aimed at preserving authentic Catholic doctrine.

Wuerl said he acted in light of interest generated following a March 24 doctrine committee rebuke of a book by one of the nation's most prominent theologians.

The doctrine committee, after examining *Quest for the Living God: Mapping the Frontiers of the Theology of God* by Elizabeth A. Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, N.Y., and a professor at Fordham University, found it riddled with errors, failing to present authentic Catholic theology.

In a 13-page letter to the bishops, Wuerl cited the April 8 criticism from the Catholic Theological Society of America in which the organization's 10-member board criticized the doctrine committee's handling of the Johnson book critique.

The theologians' statement faulted Wuerl's committee for not conversing with Johnson before it went public with its criticisms, for misrepresenting Johnson's theological arguments, and for presenting a narrow understanding of the role of theologians today.

In his new statement, Wuerl said the theologians "seem to misread the legitimate and apostolic role of bishops in addressing the right relationship of theologians and bishops."

In the letter to the bishops, titled "Bishops as Teachers: A Resource for Bishops," Wuerl argued that it is the role of the bishop to be the judge of authentic theology and the final arbiter of the presentation of authentic Catholic theology.

Wuerl said that spelling out the proper role and authority of the bishop at this time has become necessary "before addressing procedural issues" that could involve dialogue with theologians.

In an oblique reference to Johnson's book, the cardinal defended his committee's strong critique of the text. "By taking the truth of revelation as a starting point, it should be pointed out that theological inquiry is not diminished but in fact enhanced, since it is only "as in every other discipline" by building on what is confidently known that deeper and fuller investigation can be pursued."

In the committee's rebuke of *Quest for the Living God*, it criticized Johnson's failure to begin her exploration with traditional Catholic doctrine.

The bishops further lamented Johnson had not sought an imprimatur from her bishop. The practice of theologians seeking out imprimaturs "approval from a bishop before a book is published" for their works has largely gone out of practice, other than for catechetical liturgical texts.

In his letter to the bishops, Wuerl advises the practice be re-adopted as part of re-establishing the proper relationship between bishop and theologian.

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The church, he wrote, "encourages a respectful dialogue between and among theologians and bishops. Such a dialogue, however, can only thrive in the context of faith. "As a person of faith, the theologian understands and appreciates the charisms of teaching entrusted to his or her bishop, and willingly submits personal theological ideas for the bishop's evaluation."

"One recognized starting point for this dialogue," Wuerl wrote, "is the request for an *imprimatur*."

Citing canon law, he went on that even for texts that do not require an imprimatur it is suggested that theologians now seek them out.

However, once a theological book is published -- such as in Johnson's case -- it is open to response from the bishops, Wuerl wrote.

"When a work is published and, particularly, if it is being used and accepted as authentic Catholic teaching, the bishops have an obligation to address it. Thus the initiation of dialogue by an author is not only welcome but recommended, before the work is published and the bishop may be constrained to make a public appraisal of it."

He said this is especially necessary because of the changed teaching environment and contemporary students' lack of catechetical sophistication.

He made the case that bishops today must exercise their teaching responsibility in the context of "the generally recognized catechetical deficiencies of the past decades beginning with the 1970s." The result of these deficiencies, he wrote, "is a generation or more of Catholics, including young Catholics today, who have little solid intellectual formation in their faith." He said that it is in this context that books used in religious studies and theology courses in Catholic colleges and universities "must be seen as de facto catechetical and formational texts."

Weurl criticized some texts used in Catholic colleges as offering "alternative pastoral and spiritual guidance in contrast to the teaching magisterium." He said this situation of diminished catechetical preparation among students now requires special attention and teaching environments.

Citing the proper role of bishops and employing a sport metaphor, Weurl wrote that for the progress of theology it needs to take place within a context of clearly articulated boundaries.

"In an sporting match, football, tennis, baseball, there are referees and umpires. The game can proceed with the supervision of a referee. In a tennis match, it is not the player who calls the ball "out of bounds" but the referee. The player may object that it was not his or her intention to hit the ball out of bounds. He or she may even question whether the ball is out of bounds. But it is the referee who must make the call. Otherwise, there can be no coherent game, no enjoyment of the match, no sense of progress in learning the sport; in short, the "tennis game" would devolve into a fruitless exchange of individuals hitting the ball."

In the Catholic Theological Society of America board's critique of the doctrine committee's report on *Quest for the Living God*, it faulted the committee for not having engaged Johnson before going public. The theologians cited a 1989 document issued by the bishops, "Doctrinal Responsibilities," which called for dialogue. Wuerl responded, saying that document was "one way of proceeding," but should not be seen "as obligatory."

"While dialogue between theologians and bishops is very important," wrote Wuerl, "it should work alongside of the bishops' primary teaching and sanctifying mission."

Wuerl concluded by writing that he hopes the doctrine committee's statement will lead to renewal and will foster "a proper and fruitful relationship between the bishops and the whole theological community."

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For the full text of Wuerl's resource, **click here**.

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- Shortly after Johnson's book *The Quest for the Living God* was published, she discussed it with *NCR* editor Tom Fox. Their discussion was posted to the *NCR* web site as a two part podcast:
Elizabeth Johnson and the Quest for the Living God

- Fox's review of that book is here: **A hunger for mature theology**
 - In August 2008, Johnson addressed a joint assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the main umbrella groups for women's and men's orders in the United States, meeting in Denver. *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. covered the event and filed this story:
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 - The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at:
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