

Elizabeth Johnson and the teaching authority of bishops

Richard McBrien | May. 16, 2011 | Essays in Theology

The action taken by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine condemning Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's book *Quest for the Living God* for its alleged lack of orthodoxy has provoked a storm of criticism -- especially from the two main organizations of Catholic theologians, the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) and the College Theology Society, as well as from Johnson's own religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph.

These reactions seem to have caught the committee's chairman, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., by surprise. In any case, [Wuerl sent a 13-page letter](#) [1] to all of the U.S. bishops on their teaching authority.

In that letter Cardinal Wuerl took issue with the 10-member board of the CTSA, accusing it of misreading "the legitimate and apostolic role of bishops in addressing the right relationship of theologians and bishops."

Bishops alone, like referees and umpires in sports, have the final word. What Wuerl failed to point out is that umpires and referees sometimes make bad calls, which in some sports are embarrassingly disclosed via instant replays or in post-play comments by the announcers.

Wuerl's letter made much of the fact that bishops are "authentic" teachers, as if the word authentic were synonymous with genuine.

On the contrary, an "authentic" teaching is simply one that is given by a bishop or body of bishops who teach in the name of the church by reason of their episcopal office.

This does not mean that the bishops are somehow above the Word of God. They must listen to it, guard it, and explain it faithfully, with the help of the Holy Spirit (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, n. 1).

At a broader official level still, the magisterium is the teaching authority inherent in and exercised by the hierarchy and theologians alike. It is known by some as the double magisterium and is rooted in both episcopal ordination (thus, the magisterium of the cathedral chair) and theological competence (the magisterium of the professorial chair).

Significantly, this distinction, based in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas (the *Quodlibet*-tales 3.4.1 ad 3), was retrieved by the late Cardinal Avery Dulles (*A Church to Believe In*, p. 109) -- an eminent theologian in his own right.

There is an even broader meaning of teaching authority in the church, namely, the teaching authority inherent in and exercised by every member of the church. It is known simply as the magisterium of the whole Church, the *Ecclesia docens* -- "the teaching Church" -- and is rooted in Baptism.

In the past, the term *Ecclesia docens* was limited to the hierarchy, while the rest of the faithful, including theologians, were considered the *Ecclesia discens* -- "the learning Church." With Vatican II, that distinction

disappeared.

This is far different from Wuerl's letter, which limits the laity to *applying* the teaching of the bishops (p. 3, para. 1).

Wuerl also took issue with the criticism that the Committee on Doctrine had not followed the bishops' own procedural rules, adopted in 1989, which required the committee to speak with Johnson (or any other theologian under review) before releasing its condemnation of her book.

Wuerl responded by saying that those rules were only "one way of proceeding," and should not be seen as "obligatory" (p. 12, para. 1).

Johnson, it must be added, teaches at Fordham University, which is located in New York City, the heart of the Archdiocese of New York. Was the Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, who also happens to be president of the U.S. Bishops' conference, consulted before the condemnation was released?

If not, why not? Nothing in the rules say explicitly that the local bishop should be consulted before any action is taken against a theologian in his diocese, but it would be a grave lapse in episcopal protocol if he were not given a "head's-up."

I am posing this only as a question. However, no lawyer (or theologian) worth his or her salt asks a question that he or she doesn't already know the answer to.

One final point: In his 2005 nomination hearings, the soon-to-be Chief Justice John Roberts insisted that the role of a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court is like a baseball umpire behind the plate. His function is simply to call balls and strikes.

If justices on the Court are only calling balls and strikes and not allowing their personal preferences to affect their judgment, why, then, are there so many 5-4 decisions -- and why do the justices divide so frequently along ideological lines?

The same questions could be asked of the bishops.

[© 2011 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.]tt

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Fr. McBrien's column "Essays in Theology" is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow the directions: <http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-in-theology/en1286with-johnson-and-teaching-authority-bishops> and click on the "E-mail alert sign-up" [2]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Essays in Theology" to your

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/24133/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>