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Bishops' response to rebuked theologian could take months

by Dan Morris-Young



BELLEVUE, WASH. -- The U.S. bishops' committee on doctrine will respond soon by letter to theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson whose 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, was severely criticized by the group, according to the executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Doctrine.

The committee will be thanking the Sister of St. Joseph, a professor of theology at Fordham University in New York, for her recent 38-page letter countering the doctrinal unit's critique of her work, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy told *NCR* June 15.

The interview took place on the sidelines of the U.S. bishops' semi-annual meeting.

Weinandy said, "The letter will acknowledge receiving her letter and thank her for sending her response to the committee and saying the committee would also study her response very thoroughly and at a future date get back to her."

Weinandy said it was not yet clearly decided who will draft the letter, but that it could be Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington who heads the committee.

"There is no set timeline" for the committee's in-depth response, the priest added, but felt it would be "months."

The bishops' doctrine committee in late March, after studying the book for one year, concluded Johnson's 2007 book "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points" and "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel."

In a June 1 letter to the bishops' doctrine committee, Johnson strenuously defended the orthodoxy of the book, saying that the committee had thoroughly misunderstood, misrepresented, and misinterpreted the book.

Asked about charges about the investigation being done in secret, not respecting due process and ignoring guidelines for dealing with theological clarifications, Weinandy said, "The committee was happy with the process it followed in light of the situation that it found itself in where they felt a pastoral response was needed and so they felt it was expedient to put out a statement."

Johnson has been quoted as saying she would have only learned of the investigation and consequent statement in news reports if her own archbishop, Timothy M. Dolan of New York, had not contacted her in advance.

"I can't comment on that. There's nothing I can say publicly," the priest replied when asked if there had been any soul-searching by committee members about not notifying Johnson of the investigation during the one year that it was in process "or about protests lodged by scores of theologians about the mode of action.

On June 10, the Catholic Theological Society of America overwhelmingly passed a resolution saying it "deeply regrets" how the bishops handled the investigation of Johnson's book and recommending the U.S. bishops establish a committee to evaluate procedures that led to their doctrine committee's April statement.

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Johnson is distinguished professor of theology at Fordham and was honored by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in 2006 for "outstanding contributions to Catholic intellectual life."

Asked if he thought the doctrinal committee would handle future potential investigations in the same way, Weinandy said, "I can't answer that because I am not a bishop."

He noted that "a number of bishops had asked that the doctrine committee review the book." He declined to mention names.

[Dan Morris-Young, NCR West Coast Correspondent, is covering the U.S. bishops' meeting in Bellevue, Wash. Watch this Web site for more reports.]

Editor's note: This article is an updated and longer version of an earlier posting.

More coverage from the U.S. bishops' meeting in Bellevue, Wash. June 15-17.

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