

Leading committee authorized rebuke

Thomas C. Fox | Aug. 2, 2011

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New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

The U.S. bishops' administrative committee last March unanimously authorized publication of a controversial doctrinal committee statement rebuking a book by Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University in New York.

According to a July 7 letter written by the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, the administrative committee "discussed both the content of and the procedure leading up to the statement," which was issued by the bishops' doctrine committee in April.

Dolan sent the letter to John E. Thiel, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, after the society issued a resolution critical of the bishops' handling of the matter. The theologians, at the society's annual meeting in June in San Jose, Calif., asked the bishops to form a committee to investigate the procedures that led to the rebuke of Johnson's *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

The Dolan letter was the first public acknowledgement that the administrative committee gave its authorization for the Johnson critique to be published. The administrative committee is made up of 36 bishops, mostly conference committee heads; it directs the work of the bishops' conference between its plenary sessions.

In his letter, Dolan told Thiel, a professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut, that all proposed bishops' committee statements need approval by the administrative committee for them to be published.

The doctrine committee's rebuke, which stated that *Quest for the Living God* undermines the Gospels and presents inauthentic Catholic theology, touched off a firestorm of criticism among theologians. Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph, is highly regarded by her colleagues and is viewed as a mainstream Catholic theologian, meticulous in her research and clear in her presentations. The committee's findings, including detailed chapter-by-chapter criticisms, took many educators by surprise.

Many U.S. theologians, including the administrative board of the Catholic Theological Society of America, came to Johnson's defense. They faulted the doctrine committee's procedures -- it never contacted Johnson during its yearlong study -- and its theological conclusions.

At the society's gathering in June, members overwhelmingly passed a resolution recommending the U.S. bishops establish a committee to evaluate the procedures that led to the doctrine committee's critique. By a vote of 147 to one, the society approved the resolution, which stated it deeply regretted the bishops' actions. The resolution claimed the bishops did not follow proper procedures in their investigation -- procedures the bishops approved in 1989 in a document aimed at quietly resolving conflicts between bishops and theologians.

In his letter to Thiel, Dolan dismissed the theologians' suggestion of setting up a committee. He wrote that after consulting counsel he had concluded that the assertion the bishops had not followed proper procedures "is somewhat inaccurate." Referring to the 1989 document, called "Doctrinal Responsibilities," Dolan said it is meant to deal with disputes between local bishops and local theologians and does not pertain to the work of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee.

"As you probably know, this document guides rather the work of individual diocesan bishops and does not presume to offer guidance to the bishops' committee on doctrine. That having been said, we bishops should always be mindful of improving the manner in which we engage theologians in a necessary discussion of their work."

Under fire after issuing its findings, the doctrine committee had defended its handling of the Johnson matter, saying the book had been out for three years, that it was being used widely in colleges and seminaries, and that the committee was under pressure to make an assessment. The committee suggested the controversy could have been easily avoided had Johnson brought her book before her local bishop for his official approval, called an imprimatur.

Responding to an offer by the doctrine committee, Johnson offered a detailed defense of her book in June. Dolan told Thiel that Johnson's response is now under consideration by the bishops.

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