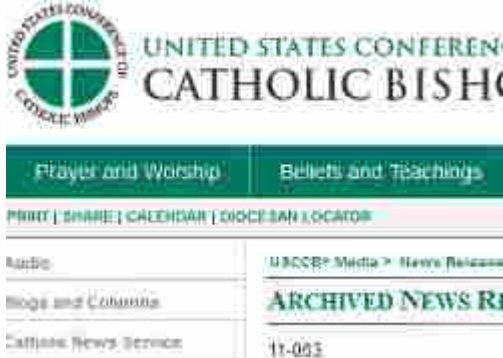


## 'Doctrinal Responsibilities': evenhanded, open and fair

Michael Buckley | Oct. 21, 2011



### VIEWPOINT

After the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine had delivered its criticism of *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* by St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, theologians and boards of theological societies in the United States contested the content of the criticism and protested the manner of its formulation (*NCR*, April 15). In particular, the regret was widespread that the committee had ignored the protocols of "Doctrinal Responsibilities," a set of guidelines approved by the U.S. bishops in 1989 on how to handle doctrinal disputes with theologians. This regret was answered by the president of the Catholic bishops' conference, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, who contended that it was in its expectations "somewhat inaccurate."

Dolan framed this central judgment clearly, publicly and graciously. It seems only appropriate, then to respond by citing his position and by indicating policies that might stand in need of further consideration.

In a July 7 letter to John E. Thiel, president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Dolan wrote: "The document ["Doctrinal Responsibilities"] does not address the particular role of the USCCB Committee on Doctrine and its specific obligations. 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."

I would offer the following reflections.

Certainly, "Doctrinal Responsibilities" makes no attempt to address the specific role of the Committee on Doctrine as such, but it necessarily touches upon its concerns insofar as it explores the proper functions of and the relationships between theologians and bishops (the magisterium) -- both to encourage positive collaboration and to resolve any problematic areas.

The full title of the document, "Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings Between Bishops and Theologians," bespoke its set purpose: among the bishops and theologians both the promotion of cooperation and the resolution of any doctrinal disputes between them.

Whereas the preface of the document specified and so limited the kind of issues that might occupy 'Doctrinal Responsibilities,' it made no parallel specification or selection among theologians and bishops. The parties were articulated in the singular as well as in the plural for the sake of these guidelines, but 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' did allow for the fact that 'several bishops or several theologians may be acting as initiating party or second party.' 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' applies simply to any doctrinal conflicts that might occur between bishops and theologians in general, and their number was not set by protocol. Nowhere was their number limited to an individual bishop or an individual theologian.

The issues that could arise between theologian(s) and bishop(s) could be profitably considered and fairly mediated if the parties in discussion or dispute have agreed to the procedures suggested by 'Doctrinal Responsibilities.' The document emphatically does not establish another office or structure of authority figures above the bishops. Rather, it suggests veteran devices by which doctrinal issues could be clarified and resolved.

In this way, and only in this way, can 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' 'guide' (to use Dolan's vocabulary) -- that is, offer suggestions or possibilities for the work of individual bishops and theologians, or for the work of the several persons who are acting in a dispute either as initiating or second party. 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' suggests a pluralism of possible protocols that could be adopted analogously by the parties for the resolution of such conflicts.

As is well-known, these protocols came out of some 10 years (1980-89) of careful study, discussion and formulation by American Catholic learned societies -- the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Canon Law Society of America, the painstaking work of the U.S. bishops' conference, and weeks of exacting examination and suggestions by the Holy See. They met the careful attention and reception of the Catholic theologians and bishops who comprised or staffed the Committee on Doctrine at that time. The American bishops overwhelmingly approved them for use in the United States in 1989. They were found to be judicious and so widely approved.

To bypass all of this collective experience and its resultant codification appeared to negate the effective presence of procedures that should be operating for the contemporary church as a 'rule of reason.' St. Thomas Aquinas maintains that the non-consideration or absence of such a rule in the event of choice opens up the likelihood of error as when a carpenter fails to use a ruler and so draws a defective line. 'It [a decision] first takes on the nature of fault from this: that without actually considering the rule, one proceeds to choice -- just as the carpenter does no wrong in not always not having at hand a measure, but in proceeding to cut without using this measure . . . in proceeding to choose without employing the rule or measure.'

What the bishops of a previous decade provided to the church in the United States through 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' was such a graceful rule or measure, one that could significantly diminish or even inhibit misunderstandings, injustice, unwarranted decisions and conflict.

Why were theologians so disappointed that the Committee on Doctrine did not attend to 'Doctrinal Responsibilities'? Because a measure such as 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' could effectively deal with conflicts between theologians and bishops -- which by definition, of course, includes the members of the Committee on Doctrine. Unresolved contradictions can effectively undermine the credibility and efficacy of leadership in the church, and this possibility makes such procedures as 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' seem particularly urgent in our day.

The Catholic world can become needlessly divided by ignorance, misrepresentations and unfairness, by unanswerable rumors and suspicions. It needs to sort these out and adjudicate charges of doctrinal infidelity by the strategies and balance offered by careful and objective procedures. 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' provides for such civility -- and so increases the possibility of justice and charity for all parties.

To be even more concrete and without attempting to parse the procedures of 'Doctrinal Responsibilities': it would seem that if the leaders of the church are calling someone and their work under judgment -- especially when a negative judgment could seriously derogate from his or her reputation -- that this process be obviously evenhanded, reverent, open and fair. The persons under consideration should be informed that this process is under way and have the opportunity both to explain whatever is at issue and to defend their work before a decision is given.

In this way, 'Doctrinal Responsibilities' could become a valuable and welcome resource for our church and its abiding peace -- one that we should not forego.

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