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Theologian disputes claim she ignored dialogue invite

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Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington delivers a report during a June 15 session of the annual spring meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Bellevue, Wash. (CNS/Stephen Brashear)

The dispute between the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee and noted theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson over her book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* escalated in late October.

Overshadowing issues of doctrine and the role of theologians in the church is the question of what contact Cardinal Donald Wuerl, head of the bishops' committee, had with Johnson -- and whether a statement, posted on the bishops' website, that Johnson "did not respond" to invitations to dialogue was correct.

The bishops' doctrine committee reaffirmed its March condemnation of Johnson's book with a statement issued Oct. 28, writing that *Quest for the Living God* was "inadequate as a presentation of the Catholic understanding of God."

Johnson responded to the bishops the same day, writing that their critique did not fully take into account a 38-page defense of the book that she sent the bishops in June.

The bishops' Oct. 28 statement, Johnson said, 'misrepresents' her book as a catechetical work and 'projects meanings, discovers insinuations and otherwise distorts the text so that in some instances I do not recognize the book I wrote.'

Moreover, the theologian wrote, the doctrine committee ignored her attempts to meet with committee members, indicating the bishops did not follow their own procedures for handling disputes between bishops and theologians, as laid out in a 1989 document titled 'Doctrinal Responsibilities: Approaches to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Misunderstandings Between Bishops and Theologians.'

Later the same day, a news release appeared on the bishops' conference website, saying that Wuerl, the archbishop of Washington, D.C., had offered to meet with Johnson three times, but 'Sr. Johnson did not respond to any of the offers.'

Three days later a series of letters and e-mails between Wuerl and Johnson were posted online, first on the website of the Catholic magazine *Commonweal*.

In an Oct. 30 letter to Wuerl, Johnson said that the cardinal's claim she didn't respond to offers for a meeting are 'demonstrably and blatantly false.'

Johnson said she is 'aghast at the accusation you make in the USCCB website post that I have not responded to any of the offers to meet.'

'I never received an offer to meet at a definite time or with a protocol or agenda that would ensure serious discussion of the issues in my book. If I had, I would have accepted immediately,' Johnson wrote. 'In addition, each offer was vague about time, indicating that a meeting would take place after the [doctrine] committee's deliberations were over.'

Johnson confirmed for *NCR* the authenticity of the letters and e-mails.

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Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops' conference, declined to comment on the exchange between Wuerl and Johnson.

'The cardinal has made his observations about [the communication],' Walsh said. '[Johnson] has made hers. He's not going to say anything further.'

Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine at the bishops' conference, also declined to comment, saying he was afraid he might make the situation 'more confused.'

Calls to the Washington archdiocese requesting comment were not returned.

Taken together, the letters released online seem to show that the theologian made several attempts to meet with the cardinal, responded to each of his communications, and was only contacted for possible meetings after statements by the bishops' doctrine committee regarding her book had already been completed.

In a letter from Johnson to the cardinal dated July 14, the theologian wrote that she wants to 'assure you explicitly of my willingness to meet face-to-face to clarify these matters, and in fact would like to do so, should you deem that helpful.'

In his July 22 reply, Wuerl wrote that he "would welcome the opportunity" to meet with the theologian and would contact her again after a September meeting of the doctrine committee.

That vague wording, Johnson said in her Oct. 30 letter, led her to believe the committee "would deliberate without meeting me" and that Wuerl would "meet with me afterwards."

Johnson, who is a professor of theology at Fordham University in New York, also declined to comment on the letters. Her department chair at the university, however, said that part of her frustration in the argument over who contacted whom may be that despite Wuerl's "entirely admirable" overtures, the cardinal never offered to allow the theologian to meet with the doctrine committee, which authored the condemnation of her book.

"Johnson presumed that the dialogue would be with her critics, not with an individual who happened to be a member of the critical board," said Terrence Tilley, the Fordham theology department chair.

For now, Tilley said, Johnson and the bishops' committee may unfortunately be separated irreconcilably, with no bridge between their two viewpoints until they engage in dialogue together.

"If the committee will not engage in dialogue, there can be no bridge," Tilley said.

On the Web

For more coverage of Johnson's letter to Wuerl, and a full list of stories relating to the U.S. bishops' condemnation of *Quest for the Living God*, visit NCRonline.org/node/27361.

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