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Scholars see 'breach' between bishops, theologians

by Joshua J. McElwee

Aftershocks of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee's moves against theologian Sr. Elizabeth Johnson spread Monday as the College Theology Society issued a statement saying the bishops' moves represent a "fundamental breach" in the call for dialogue in the church and wounds the "entire community of Catholic theologians."

The Monday statement from the College Theology Society, which represents lay and religious undergraduate theology faculty, is the latest in a months-long saga over Johnson's book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, which the bishops first blasted in March.

In late October, the bishops' Committee on Doctrine reconfirmed their condemnation, which touched off questions of why the bishops hadn't first attempted dialogue with the St. Joseph sister and what that might mean for the practice of theology.

The theology society's statement, signed by its seven board members and four officers and addressed to the society's membership, expresses "sadness and grave concern" over the bishops' October statement because the bishops went forward "without entering into a process of dialogue with [Johnson] about the issues being raised."

"The course of action taken by the Committee on Doctrine represents a fundamental breach in the call for dialogue within the church and in particular between theologians and bishops, a call that is one of the hallmarks of the documents of the Second Vatican Council," reads the statement, which was posted to the society's website.

Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the bishops' secretariat for doctrine, said in a phone interview that the doctrine committee "does not really want to say anything" about the society's statement.

The bishops' committee, Weinandy said, considers the situation with Johnson "has come to an end."

"The doctrine committee feels that it's said all that it wants to say or needs to say," Weinandy said. "For the doctrine committee, it's basically at a closing point at this point on this particular situation."

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, the U.S. bishops' spokesperson, said the bishops "would have no comment" on the society's statement.

Johnson's book, which the bishops said in their March statement was not in "accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points," was reaffirmed as "inadequate as a presentation of the Catholic understanding of God" in the committee's Oct. 28 statement.

Johnson responded to the bishops the same day, saying their statement "paints an incorrect picture of the fundamental line of thought the book develops." She also said she lamented the fact that her attempts to meet with members of the committee to discuss the book were rebuffed.

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That response touched off a firestorm of controversy after a statement on the bishops' conference website claimed that Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the committee's chairman, had made several attempts to meet with Johnson that went unanswered.

Johnson responded in a letter to Wuerl that those claims were "demonstrably and blatantly false," and a series of letters between the two that were made public seemed to show that the theologian made several attempts to meet with the cardinal and had responded to each of his communications.

In its statement Monday, the College Theology Society said the doctrine committee's reluctance to meet with Johnson contradicts the U.S. bishops' own guidelines on how to handle doctrinal disputes with theologians, as laid out in a 1989 document titled "Doctrinal Responsibilities."

The society also writes that the committee's actions violate the Vatican's norms for examinations of theologians by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as outlined in a 1997 document titled *Ratio Agendi*, or "The Regulations for Doctrinal Investigation."

Asked whether the bishops' doctrine committee would still be open to meeting with Johnson to discuss her book, Weinandy told *NCR* on Wednesday that Johnson is free to "send a letter" to Wuerl.

"If she wants to get in touch with the committee she's free to -- anybody's free to get in touch with the committee if they want," Weinandy said.

Asked how the committee would answer Johnson's claims that her previous attempts at contact had been rebuffed, Weinandy said he had no comment.

The College Theology Society, which is made up of more than 600 college and university professors, represents lay and religious undergraduate theology teachers. Monday's statement by the society is its

second on the Johnson situation. Its first, issued in April after the bishops' first condemnation of the theologian, said the doctrine committee's move "breeds disillusionment, fear, and mistrust among younger theologians in their relation to bishops."

Summing up its latest critique, the society writes that the U.S. bishops' move against Johnson harms the "entire community of Catholic theologians."

"The action taken by the Committee on Doctrine wounds not only Dr. Johnson, but the entire community of Catholic theologians as well, who long to be in more constructive relationships with our bishops -- in particular, to be in conversation with them about how the living tradition of belief and practice of our Catholic faith can best speak to the most pressing issues of our time," the statement reads.

"The vital working relationships among bishops, theologians, and the entire people of God can only be advanced by recognizing the dignity and vocation of theologians and indeed of all the faithful in the mission of the church, and by cultivating practices of dialogue that can promote our collaborative relationship."

The society's full statement, as taken from the College Theology Society's website, follows.

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The Board of the College Theology Society wishes to express to our membership our sadness and grave concern in response to the statement released on October 28, 2011 by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' Committee on Doctrine regarding the case of Professor Elizabeth Johnson.

The Committee on Doctrine has chosen to publicly criticize and discredit -- not once but twice -- a work by one of our most esteemed colleagues without entering into a process of dialogue with her about the issues being raised. Dr. Johnson prepared a substantive response that repudiated the criticisms of her work as unfounded, and requested that a formal dialogue be established between her and the Committee on Doctrine to discuss the range of theological issues raised by their initial Statement issued March 24, 2011. Her request was not granted; instead the second statement not only repeated the previous characterization of her work without engaging the issues she raised in her response, but also raised new criticisms of Dr. Johnson's retrieval of female metaphors and symbols of God as found within both biblical texts and classic texts from our Catholic theological tradition.

The course of action taken by the Committee on Doctrine represents a fundamental breach in the call for dialogue within the Church and in particular between theologians and bishops, a call that is one of the hallmarks of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The necessity of dialogue between bishops and theologians is delineated in the 1989 statement approved by the U.S. Bishops, *Doctrinal Responsibilities*. It is likewise found in the *Regulation for Doctrinal Examination (Ratio Agendi)*, which specifies the procedures the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is to follow in cases of doctrinal dispute, procedures that are in keeping with the principles of canon law regarding due process and the rights and responsibilities of members of the Church.

The action taken by the Committee on Doctrine wounds not only Dr. Johnson, but the entire community of Catholic theologians as well, who long to be in more constructive relationships with our bishops?in particular, to be in conversation with them about how the living tradition of belief and practice of our Catholic faith can best speak to the most pressing issues of our time. The vital working relationships among bishops, theologians, and the entire people of God can only be advanced by recognizing the

dignity and vocation of theologians and indeed of all the faithful in the mission of the Church, and by cultivating practices of dialogue that can promote our collaborative relationship.

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