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Theological society backs Vatican-criticized nun



ST. LOUIS -- The board of the largest membership organization of U.S. theologians issued a statement of support Thursday afternoon (June 7) for Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, a member in their ranks who was the subject of harsh criticism from the Vatican just days ago.

Writing that it considers Farley's work "reflective, measured, and wise," the leadership of the some 1,500 member Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) says in the statement it is "especially concerned" that the Vatican's criticism presents a limiting understanding of the role of Catholic theology.

In a formal notification released June 4, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticized Farley's 2006 book on sexual ethics, titled *Just Love*.

Farley's positions on masturbation, homosexual acts, homosexual unions, the indissolubility of marriage and the problem of divorce and remarriage "contradicts" or "is opposed to" or "does not conform to" church teaching, the Vatican notification said.

The congregation said the book "cannot be used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling and formation, or in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue."

John Thiel, CTSA president, told *NCR* that the society's leadership decided to issue the statement Thursday because it wanted to both acknowledge Farley as a "distinguished theologian" and state that it is "concerned that the CDF notification had a rather constrained understanding of the task of theology."

[The notification] seemed to understand that the role of authentic Catholic theologians was to simply repeat what the magisterium teaches," said Thiel, a theologian at Fairfield University.

And even though that is a part of the role of the theologian, the board also considered it important to say that theologians are always in the business of considering all questions "that are important to consider."

While Thursday's statement from the CTSA leadership does not debate the conclusions drawn by the Vatican congregation regarding Farley's book, it says the Vatican's move "risks giving the impression that there can be no constructive role in the life of the Church for works of theology" that attempt to:

1. "give voice to the experience and concerns of ordinary believers;"
2. "raise questions about the persuasiveness of certain official Catholic positions;" or,
3. "offer alternative theological frameworks as potentially helpful contributions to the authentic development of doctrine."

Such an understanding of the nature of theology inappropriately conflates the distinctive tasks of catechesis and theology," the statement, signed by the ten-members of the CTSA's board, continues.

With regard to the subject matter of Professor Farley's book, it is simply a matter of fact that faithful Catholics in every corner of the Church are raising ethical questions like those Professor Farley has addressed. In raising and exploring such questions with her customary sensitivity and judiciousness, Professor Farley has invited us to engage the Catholic tradition seriously and thoughtfully."

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Thursday's statement from the CTSA comes as the group is beginning an annual four-day conference. The Farley matter is expected to come up in both side conversations and formal discussions.

The agenda for the event includes a full "business meeting" Friday of the society members in attendance, expected to number in the several hundreds. At that meeting, a number of theologians familiar with the procedures of the society tell *NCR*, a larger statement regarding the Farley case may come up for a vote.

At last year's CTSA gathering, held in June, the society's membership overwhelmingly approved a statement of support for St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, whose book *Quest for the Living God* was sharply criticized by the U.S. bishops" in March 2011.

The theologians are also expected to tackle a number of other hot-button issues at this year's gathering, including the U.S. bishops' opposition to a controversial federal contraceptive mandate, economic reform, and what procedures Catholic hospitals should consider as abortions.

The theme of this year's convention, the group's 67th, is "Sacrament/s and the Global Church." There are to be four separate plenary addresses, as well as a bevy of breakout sessions on a multitude of issues.

Among the issues to be addressed in the plenary sessions is the state of sacramental theology since the Second Vatican Council, the effect of globalization of the world church, and the role of gender theory in theological questions.

The nearly 50 breakout sessions include:

- A discussion on the impact of the U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, which is celebrating its 25 anniversary. Present at that session is to be retired Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland, who chaired the bishops' committee responsible for drafting the letter;
- A panel discussion on "Church and government" expected to address the U.S. bishops' opposition to a mandate from the Health and Human Services Department requiring coverage of contraceptives in health care plans;
- A session on "Theological responses to the Arab Spring";
- A discussion on news in 2010 that Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmstead had revoked the Catholic status of a hospital in his diocese following the termination of an 11-week pregnancy to save the life of the mother in 2009. That presentation, titled "The Case *Not* Heard: Moral Methodology and the Phoenix "Abortion" Debate," is to include presentations from a theologian at Boston College and a representative of the Catholic Health Association.

This week's gathering will also see the formal selection of new leadership for the CTSA.

Susan Ross, a professor of theology and a faculty scholar at Loyola University Chicago who was named president-elect of the group last year, is expected to formally replace Thiel as president.

Richard Gaillardetz, the Joseph McCarthy professor of Catholic systematic theology and the group's current vice president, is expected to be named its president-elect, which sets him to take the helm of the society in 2013.

The society is also expected Saturday night to name the recipient of its John Courtney Murray Award, the highest honor bestowed by the CTSA.

Previous recipients of the award include both Farley, who was named the recipient in 1992, and Johnson, who won in 2004. Last year's honoree was Fr. James Coriden, a prominent canon lawyer and professor at the Washington Theological Union.

Full text of the statement by the CTSA leadership regarding the Farley matter follows.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. Look for more reports from him as the CTSA gathering continues.]

More stories from the CTSA convention:

- **Theological society executive board backs Vatican-criticized nun**
- **African theologian questions church's exclusion of women**
- **[Theological society membership endorses support for Farley, elects leaders](#)**
- **Vatican-criticized nun addresses fellow theologians**
- **Fordham professor honored by theological society**

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STATEMENT OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA ON THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH'S

?NOTIFICATION: REGARDING THE BOOK *JUST LOVE: A FRAMEWORK FOR CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS* BY SISTER MARGARET A. FARLEY, R.S.M.? (March 30, 2012)

On June 4, 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a ?Notification? entitled ?Regarding the Book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* by Sister Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M.? The ?Notification? judged that, in a number of respects, Professor Farley?s book presents positions on matters of sexual ethics that are contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium.

We, the undersigned members of the Board of Directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America, wish to note that Professor Farley is a highly respected member of the theological community. A former President of the CTSA and a recipient of the Society?s John Courtney Murray Award, she has devoted her life to teaching and writing on ethical issues and has done so in ways that have been reflective, measured, and wise. Her work has prompted a generation of theologians to think more deeply about the Christian meaning of personal relationships and the divine life of love that truly animates them. The judgment of the ?Notification? that a number of Professor Farley?s stated positions are contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium is simply factual. In our judgment, however, Professor Farley?s purpose in her book is to raise and explore questions of keen concern to the faithful of the Church. Doing so is one very legitimate way of engaging in theological inquiry that has been practiced throughout the Catholic tradition.

The Board is especially concerned with the understanding of the task of Catholic theology presented in the ?Notification.? The ?Notification? risks giving the impression that there can be no constructive role in the life of the Church for works of theology that 1) give voice to the experience and concerns of ordinary believers, 2) raise questions about the persuasiveness of certain official Catholic positions, and 3) offer alternative theological frameworks as potentially helpful contributions to the authentic development of doctrine. Such an understanding of the nature of theology inappropriately conflates the distinctive tasks of catechesis and theology. With regard to the subject matter of Professor Farley?s book, it is simply a matter of fact that faithful Catholics in every corner of the Church are raising ethical questions like those Professor Farley has addressed. In raising and exploring such questions with her customary sensitivity and judiciousness, Professor Farley has invited us to engage the Catholic tradition seriously and thoughtfully.

Signed,

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