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U.S. bishops formally publish new theological procedures

by Joshua J. McElwee

The U.S. bishops' committee tasked with enforcing church doctrine has formally published procedures for investigating theologians a year after the procedures were approved apparently without consultation or notice to theologians.

NCR first reported on the procedures Aug. 17, after their existence came to light this summer in two academic journal articles by canon lawyer Fr. James Coriden.

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The U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine formally published the protocols in the Sept. 6 volume of *Origins*, the documentary service of Catholic News Service, along with an explanatory note.

According to the procedures, which the U.S. bishops' committee says were approved in September 2011, the committee "reserves the right" to investigate theologians without dialogue "if it judges that intervention is needed for the pastoral guidance of the Catholic faithful."

In the explanatory note published in *Origins*, the U.S. bishops' committee says the procedures are a "working tool" of the committee, which is "free to update, modify or elaborate" their content "at any time."

Approval of the procedures a year ago came at a time when the bishops and their committee were being questioned about their treatment of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a noted theologian whose work they criticized in March 2011.

According to the new protocols, the bishops' committee can respond to a theologian with whom they find "error and/or ambiguity" by requesting the theologian publish clarifications; encouraging other scholars to publish a critique; or publishing a critique in the name of the committee, its chairman or its executive director.

In responses to the committee's action in the Johnson case, the two primary U.S. theological membership societies faulted the bishops for not following a set of procedures, "Doctrinal Responsibilities," created in 1989 for dealing with doctrinal questions.

Those procedures were the result of deliberations between a group of bishops and theologians over a period of years and were approved by the full body of U.S. bishops and endorsed by the Vatican.

In its explanatory note, the U.S. bishops' committee says it "does not consider" the new procedures to be a replacement for the 1989 protocols as "the two are very different kinds of documents."

The 1989 procedures, the committee says, only outline steps for diocesan bishops to take when confronting local theologians and "does not address the role of the Committee on Doctrine."

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