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Outgoing doctrinal committee head talks investigating theologians, love of teaching

by Joshua J. McElwee

The outgoing head of the U.S. bishops' office tasked with upholding church teaching has said while he thinks "there's great hope" for bishops to work together with some U.S. theologians, attempts to work with others "might not be so productive."

In an exclusive 40-minute interview Jan. 31, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy reflected on his eight years as the key staffer for the bishops' doctrine committee, which during his tenure has issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians.

Weinandy, who has been the executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Doctrine since 2005, plans to step down in August.

Speaking on his cell phone from Austin, Texas, where he had been participating in ecumenical discussions with the leaders of several Protestant denominations, Weinandy touched upon his involvement in the theological critiques, his understanding of how theology develops over time, and what he sees on the horizon for the bishops' committee.

The U.S. bishops' doctrine committee, made up of nine U.S. prelates, shifted leadership from Washington, D.C., Cardinal Donald Wuerl to St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt in November.

Citing the sensitivity of the work of the committee, Weinandy answered many questions with little elaboration. Following is the full interview with Weinandy, edited for clarity and length.

NCR: You've been at the secretariat since 2005. When you started there, what kind of focus did you have on what you wanted to do?

Weinandy: I primarily took it to serve the bishops. So I didn't have any sort of agenda or anything. I wasn't sure what it all entailed. I primarily took it because they asked me to take it.

How did things start to come into focus? How did you develop a track for what you wanted to do?

To be honest, things come to us. We don't usually seek things out. We did a document on worthy reception of Communion and other things, but doctrine is not very proactive.

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, the director of media for the bishops' conference, gave the official job description for your role, which is to be a priest who "oversees, directs, and manages the Secretariat for Doctrine." That's pretty broad. How do you interpret it?

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As issues arise, I and my staff and outside consultants, we give information to the committee. And the committee asks us to do things. A lot of it is doing research, passing on information, giving them things that they should read and look at. That takes in most of what we do.

We've dealt with a lot of medical moral issues over my time there, with stem cells, that sort of thing. Of course, you know the doctrinal issues that we've kind of dealt with.

You've been there eight years, going on nine. Is there something that you consider your biggest achievement? Is there something you're most proud of?

I think I tried to serve the bishops as best I could, and the committee. That's what I'm basically happy with. I think I did a fairly decent job. At least, from what I gather, they were always quite happy with how I helped them out. That's the main thing that I'm happy about.

It's a very important job. Not always very exciting, but a very important job.

Not always very exciting?

Not like teaching. Teaching was a much more exciting job in many ways, being in the classroom and teaching students.

What about teaching did you find more exciting?

You're dealing with theological issues and arguments. And helping the students understand things, grasping the significance of issues, questions -- what things work, why the faith is important.

When you talk about the incarnation, you're talking about something that's very, very marvelous. Or the Trinity. It's a wonderful thing to be able to talk about the Trinity.

Teachers, especially academics like you, also debate with each other, in public and in written critiques. What does it feel like to move from that arena of academia into the doctrine committee, where there might be a question of who has final say or authority?

When you're in your classroom, obviously you can't teach anything you want, but you have a little more freedom to do that. Whereas being the executive director for doctrine, your primary responsibility is to help the bishops in fulfilling their role as bishops. But I never made any final decisions on anything at the secretariat.

I want to quote a 19th-century German theologian named Johann Sebastian von Drey. He wrote that the theologian is charged with "developing the tradition beyond its current state so that it can meet new questions, needs, and circumstances." You've been on both sides now, in academia and at the secretariat. How do you see something like that? How are theologians charged with developing tradition?

I think that's very important. We know that the tradition develops within the church, and we get better insights or new insights or we expand what we already know. But in doing that, you never deny what the basic truth of the faith is. That whatever the development is, it is helping to bring to greater light and greater beauty what we already know to be true. But it's never a denial or a change of what we already know to be true.

I think John Henry Cardinal Newman was quite clear on that in his development of doctrine. You're never going to get a situation where you say Jesus is God or man for 1,500 years and then decide he's not. That's not a development. That's what the church says, it's not what I say.

Do you think the person at the secretariat for doctrine is expected to draw lines for when a development has gone too far?

I don't think the executive director for the secretariat for doctrine draws any lines. I think what he does is present questions that the bishops bring to the staff. And we feed to [the bishops], along with their own study and reading, various issues, possible scenarios, ways of looking at it, possible answers. But I never drew any lines.

Mostly, they're directing questions for us. They bring concerns to the table, or somebody brings concerns to the table, and then we go about researching and giving them what we've found, give them things to read, to study, to look at.

During your tenure, there's been criticism from theologians and their membership societies of the committee for its criticism of theologians. How do you respond to people who say that during your time, the secretariat seemed adversarial or antagonistic?

If that's how they feel, and it's obvious that is how they feel, that's unfortunate. The committee, I think, just thought it was fulfilling its responsibilities as to what it was supposed to do as bishops and as a committee.

One thing that's mentioned when I talk to theologians is whether the committee pursues dialogue with theologians when their work comes into question.

Yes, but you only talk to certain theologians.

I don't think that's the case. I've reached out to many theologians, including consultants on the bishops' committee, and never receive responses from them.

The consultants aren't going to answer you because they feel they're in a privileged position to say one way or the other. Obviously, if they said, "Everything is fine and dandy," you wouldn't believe it. And if they said they wished something was a little bit different at times, and then they'd feel that they're speaking out of house. I don't think it's fair to expect them to say anything.

Well, there's no doubt that many theologians wish there was more cooperation with them.

Well, I would point to the meeting we had with young theologians on the new evangelization in 2011. That was very good. We have another one coming up in September. While I and my staff did the legwork on that, the source of that idea was Cardinal Wuerl. He brought it to the committee and the committee thought it was a great idea.

How do you see theologians and bishops working together in the future?

"Theologians" is a very broad category of people. I think that there's great hope for working together with some theologians, and then with others it might not be so productive. It's hard to say. Theologians are not a monolithic group. I'd love to see cooperation and I think there is quite a bit of cooperation with bishops and theologians, but obviously that's not the case with the entire group. But that would be expected in any situation.

What advice might you give your successor on this topic?

I don't know who it will be, but I think he's going to have to come in and learn as he goes along as I learned as I went along. I will tell him that working with the bishops on the doctrine committee has been a great joy for me.

Besides theologians, I've talked to a number of people who worked at the conference around your tenure. One thing that's come up in conversation a couple of times is that during your time at the secretariat, there was some involvement of your office in the Vatican's critique of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. What was going on there?

Whether we did or not, I can't say anything about what Rome might have asked anybody at the conference to do. If Rome wants to let it be known, they can. But I have no authority to speak on things that Rome is dealing with.

Looking at questions of theologians and other issues, it seems that the job involves adversarial situations or even a bit of turmoil. Is that just part of it?

The main point of the doctrine committee and I and my staff is to promote the teaching of church doctrine in the world, so it has a very positive core to it. The whole point is to help further the truth of the faith and help bishops do that. But obviously, there can be situations where the bishops think this is not being done very well.

At that point, there might be some disagreement or tension, but it's the bishops who discern whether the doctrine is being promoted or not.

I think St. Paul had a problem with that as well at times. He was a great proclaimer of the Gospel, but he was not happy with what everybody was saying.

The qualifications for your successor, as given in the job posting, are fairly rote: a doctorate in theology, pastoral experience and the like. Besides that, what does a person in the role need?

I think he has to be able to work with a great many people. You've got to work with the bishops on your committee, and then you've got to work with bishops on other committees. You're dealing with huge numbers of bishops, so you have to be able to work with all of them. And then you've got all the people at the conference that you're working with on a daily basis.

You have to be pretty flexible. You can't sort of have the attitude, "It's got to be done my way." Otherwise, you're not going to be happy from the word go.

The job posting is pretty specific, saying the role has to be filled by a priest. Do you think it a layperson could ever do the job?

I don't know. When I look around, I see there are a lot of great lay theologians. And there are probably, number-wise, more competent lay theologians than clerics at this point. Now there would be a disagreement on who those laypeople are.

In one sense, it should be probably a priest because a lot of times you're dealing with issues that sort of have a very sensitive nature about them. And you're dealing with the public, and I think dealing in public and being a priest gives you a little more -- probably wrongly -- credibility in a way. Falsely at times, maybe.

In a sense, a layperson could have just as much credibility as a priest, but when you're talking about church teaching and doctrine and morals, it probably helps if you're in a public manner, a priest.

Could a woman fulfill the role?

I suppose if a layperson could, they come in both genders. But as I said, I would agree that probably the best thing would be to have a priest.

Moving back to theologians again: Two of the theological societies -- the College Theology Society and the Catholic Theological Society of America -- at one point criticized the committee during your tenure. What has to be done in terms of the relations of the committee with those societies?

I don't think I want to say because it's not for me to determine or suggest publicly what that might be. It's the bishops who determine that and make public how they see how things should develop and progress. It's not my place to say publicly how I think that they should develop and progress.

Your immediate predecessor, Msgr. John Strykowski, is now a parish priest in Brooklyn, N.Y. His predecessor, of course, is now an archbishop and has served for two Vatican congregations. Jokingly, Capuchins are sort of the hot episcopal commodity these days. Is that looking like a possibility for you?

How would I know? I'm going to go back into academics; at least that's what I'm thinking right now. I'm going to take a sabbatical and then hopefully by August 2014, I'll have an academic position somewhere. I plan to do writing as well as other things.

Is there a certain topic you plan to write about?

A long time ago, a number of people suggested I write a one-volume systematic theology. And I've given that a lot of thought, at least in my head, over quite a number of years, so I thought I'd try to give it a shot, going through the various doctrines and how they all fit together. I'll have a unique take on it all, but I won't tell you what that is because until I get it out there, I don't want to say what it is.

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