

## New doctrinal watchdog: theological intervention sometimes necessary

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 30, 2013

The new head of the U.S. bishops' office that has in recent years attracted controversy for criticizing theologians has said he hopes to be in dialogue with those theologians but may sometimes have to make interventions to "make sure that the faith is being handed down intact."

In an exclusive 30-minute interview Thursday, Jesuit Fr. Peter Ryan reflected on his appointment as the new key staffer for the bishops' doctrine committee, which since 2005 has issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians.

Addressing his new office's previous critique of theologians, Ryan said Thursday while he doesn't see himself as "drawing lines" in theological debates, "it is true that at times some determinations need to be made about whether something is helping the efforts to hand the faith on or not."

Speaking on his cellphone as he prepared to travel to Omaha, Neb., to visit that archdiocese's Institute for Priestly Formation, Ryan touched upon his vision for his new role with the U.S. bishops, his understanding of the theologian's responsibilities, and how he deals pastorally with people struggling to live within the bounds of official church teaching.

Ryan, a member of his order's Maryland province and formerly the director of spiritual formation at the St. Louis archdiocese's Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, [was announced Wednesday](#) [1] as the new executive director of the bishops' secretariat of doctrine and canonical affairs.

He will assume the role in August, formally replacing Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy.

The secretariat, which carries out the work of the nine prelates of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee, is known for watching over the work of Catholic theologians in its task of upholding church teaching. It is currently led by St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt.

Following is the full interview with Ryan, edited for clarity and length.

**As you look to the move to the bishops' secretariat, how are you thinking about what you might want to focus on in your new role?**

Really, my job is going to be pretty much what the bishops have in mind. Obviously, we know already certain issues are of special concern to the bishops, and so those are the ones I'll be especially focusing on. Now, the health care mandate, of course, is a very important issue. That's going to be something that we'll be dealing with, no doubt.

The bishops have said a lot of things about same-sex marriage and what that means and what that's all about.

Besides those, there are just a lot of bioethical issues. The issue of stem-cell research -- obviously, a lot of progress has been made with adult stem cells, and that's a wonderful thing. So we don't want [people] to kind of

think the church is somehow against technological progress. By no means; but obviously it has been done within the context of what's really good for human beings, all things considered, and not treating ourselves as somehow the masters of creation, but rather those who are called to receive it as a gift and respect it as such.

**Just to make sure I'm hearing you right, you think your central role will be to focus on the issues of central concern to the bishops?**

The job description is really providing oversight of the doctrinal committee staff -- providing staff support, really, for the doctrinal committee. And so I'll make sure that they have what they need to do their job in preserving, protecting, handing on the faith.

That's going to have a lot of different dimensions to it, but I'll find out more specifically what they are once I'm there in the saddle.

**Among those issues are certainly bioethical issues?**

Yes, exactly. They're becoming, as Sr. Mary Ann Walsh noted, bigger and bigger. It's an area that just keeps showing up in the news because new developments are available all the time.

**Can you talk a little bit on your background on those issues? The bishops' release mentioned that you're a fellow at that Westchester Institute, but didn't give other specifics.**

Actually, the Westchester Institute has not really been active for several years. But it was going great guns for quite some time and had some wonderful symposia with some really quite remarkable Catholic scholars along with experts in certain areas.

There were a whole lot of different topics that were discussed: When does brain death occur, and is brain death real death? What is the definition of a human embryo? Are there alternatives to embryonic stem-cell research that provide the equivalent of it?

There were conferences on same-sex marriage and other kinds of unions and how we ought to understand them. We had one on heterologous embryo transfer, which really in layman's terms is embryo adoption. And one on HIV and condom use and that sort of thing.

I was very much involved in those discussions and in a couple of cases, I was the one who was organizing the talks, or kind of moderating the discussion.

**For those looking at you or trying to understand your background, would you say your opinion on these matters was formed by those discussions or your time at the institute?**

In some areas, my opinion was formed. It wasn't as though I had no view at all when I went to those discussions, but it is true in certain kinds of areas, I -- for example, what counts as an embryo and a non-embryonic entity requires a certain amount of technical understanding.

On those areas, I was certainly open to try and understand what was going on so I could come to a conclusion about the morality of it. But as far as issues where the church has a clear teaching, for example, in vitro fertilization, I accept what's been handed down.

And I think that's part of my job, to really help the bishops preserve the faith that we've received.

**On this issue of understanding your background: If people, especially theologians, want to understand you better, what should they know? Where should they look? What should they read?**

I've been very interested in the ultimate fulfillment of the human person, which I suppose sounds highfalutin. But the point is that it seems to me that we don't focus enough on the gift that is being offered through Jesus, the gift of salvation and what awaits us in the Kingdom. What exactly is the Kingdom? And how do we understand that? And how do we understand the relationship between our human fulfillment and supernatural fulfillment?

It might seem as though this is pretty far from a concern of moral theology, but in fact if moral theology is all about being good, trying to understand what it means to do the right thing, there must be an intrinsic connection between that and what our fulfillment ultimately is -- what the good, for us, is.

Those topics do require some pretty close analysis, as you might imagine, but I think they're especially important because they enable us to kind of understand better what is being offered.

And I think what's being offered is the full range of human fulfillment that we long for. And I think that one reason people don't get too excited about heaven is that it seems distant and hard to relate to. ... If we understood that it's going to be a full-bodied human fulfillment and a supernatural fulfillment, then I think we'd find ourselves much more excited about it.

And if we understood it as not automatic -- possible to miss out on, but something the Lord really wants for us -- then I think our evangelization efforts would be much more likely to succeed.

Because if you think, "Wow, this offer of salvation, of heaven, of the Kingdom is just magnificent ... and it's not automatic, but if I cooperate with grace, the Lord says it's his desire to give it me," then I think we would find people being willing to accept some of the tough teachings, the teachings that we have to defend that are not terribly popular in the modern world, teachings that strike some people as a kind of strange bit of bad news within the good news.

**What do you identify as the tough teachings?**

I think the teachings that I'm talking about are the teachings that happen to have a certain amount of controversy: teachings about sexual morality, teachings about bioethical issues in some cases, teachings about life issues. Those sorts of teachings tend to be teachings that people on all sides of the issue would agree are the neuralgic ones.

But I think if they're explained in a way that show they're not just rules imposed from without, but rather arise\* from the meaning of being human and respecting what's truly human, then I think we're in business.

I'm not sure if I'm remembering this correctly, but you may have said something in your article about me about a ban on divorce and remarriage.

**I think I said church teaching prohibits divorce and remarriage.**

Right. But, see, even the word "prohibits" already assumes it's something the church could either allow or not allow, and its not allowing it is somehow a legalistic imposition from without.

But I think if we understand the issues as arising from the meaning of being human and not impositions being imposed from without by authority figures, then I think they'll make more sense to people.

**Since you specified the church's teaching on divorce and remarriage, I wonder how you would say this on a pastoral level in talking to someone who has been divorced who was obviously in an unhealthy relationship and wants to continue with their life. How do you consider that?**

Well, there certainly does need to be a lot of pastoral outreach in that area and many other areas where people have real-life problems. I think the first thing to do is to be genuinely compassionate and understanding and to reach out to them with genuine pastoral care.

At the same time, the teaching about marriage is right there in the Gospel. It's pretty clearly not something the church happened to come up with years later. ... And so I don't think that somehow it makes sense to think that being pastorally sensitive could somehow mean compromising that teaching,

... Sometimes people have to accept a really difficult reality that in fact they are married, and then we just have to support them as well as we can. And if they're not willing to live by the church's teaching, then we still love them and welcome them to church.

That doesn't mean that we violate what the church says about holy Communion, but it does mean we try and reach out to them and help and support them as much as we can.

**You're going now, obviously, from an academic role as a professional theologian into a role at the bishops' conference. The movie image of an academic is that debates can go on for a while, maybe for decades. As you move from that realm, do you bring an idea that there might be times where you have to step into those debates?**

Well, if that's what's called for. I don't consider myself to be sort of in charge of the whole thing. We're trying to supply support for the bishops. And maybe, at times, it seems to me there's something that needs to be dealt with, and I'll suggest that to Archbishop Nienstedt.

But by and large, they're the ones setting the agenda, and I want to support them and help them as much as I'm able to.

**Do you see yourself having to draw lines in academic debate as you go into the bishops' conference, of saying what's in and out of bounds?**

I don't see myself as drawing lines, particularly. I think there's a faith that's been handed down. It has a certain meaning. I think doing theology presupposes the faith that's been handed down. There's a kind of meaning there. So the question there is: Are we presupposing that faith and kind of operating within it? (Creatively within it, to be sure.)

A lot of stuff is not already completely settled. And there's room for real creativity. And even understanding some of the things that have been settled can take some wonderful, creative theological work. But it is true that at times, some determinations need to be made about whether something is helping the efforts to hand the faith on or not.

But I do also want to say dialogue is extremely important. ... I would hope to be able to continue having conversations. Of course, that doesn't mean that decisions never need to be made, but I want to make them in light of the importance of both dialogue and fidelity to the faith that's been handed on.

**Do you see those two things as tension points?**

I think they're complementary realities.

**Obviously, under your predecessor Fr. Weinandy's time at the secretariat, the bishops' committee came into criticism from the theological societies, particularly regarding the handling of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson. As you enter the role, how do you see that now? Do you see it as part of your role to repair relations with theologians?**

I'm not really in a position to try and evaluate how things were done before. I have a great deal of respect for Fr. Weinandy, and my general impression is that he's done a marvelous job. But I can just make the general statement that it's really important to be in conversation and it's also really important to make sure that the faith is being handed down intact.

**When you mention conversation and dialogue, do you also think of collaboration?**

I would think that there would be room for collaboration, what precise form that would take I don't know. It's not as though I'm going to say I don't think collaboration is a good idea. I do think it's a good idea. On the other hand, I don't know enough about precisely what the job is going to involve in order to say let's collaborate in this, that, and the other way.

**Is there anything we didn't speak about here that you want to say?**

I think it's important to focus on the central gift of salvation in Jesus. He's the one, and the church he founded is really at the heart of what we're supposed to be doing: standing up for him, his teaching, his church -- protecting the least of our brothers and sisters.

Really trying our best to make sure the gift that's been given to us is able to continue being given in its fullest. That's really how I understand my role to help the bishops do.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an NCR staff writer. His email address is [jmcelwee@ncronline.org](mailto:jmcelwee@ncronline.org). Follow him on Twitter: [@joshjmac](https://twitter.com/joshjmac) [2].]

*\*The original version of this story included a mistranscribed word in place of "arise."*

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