

Report: CTSA excludes conservative views

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 21, 2013

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Following release of a report that criticized its members for sometimes excluding members with conservative or traditional views, the nation's largest society of Catholic theologians has committed itself to work for greater inclusivity.

The Catholic Theological Society of America, which counts some 1,400 academics among its ranks, has adopted a set of six new guidelines to help members better respect "diverse theological and ecclesial sensibilities."

Some see the society's attention to diversity in its ranks as a response to its backing of theologians rebuked by the Vatican and the U.S. bishops' conference for holding progressive theological views.

In one example, the society's board issued a statement of support for Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley in 2012 following harsh criticism by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of one of her books. In another, society members at their 2011 annual meeting voted to express support for St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson following similar criticism from the U.S. bishops' Doctrine Committee of one of her books.

The society formed a seven-member ad hoc committee last fall to study inclusion of conservative viewpoints in society proceedings. The committee's report was unusually blunt.

"The self-conception of many members that the CTSA is open to all Catholic theologians is faulty and self-deceptive," states the report, dated May 15 but released by the society in October. "As one of our members put it, the CTSA is a group of liberal theologians and 'this permeates virtually everything.' Because the CTSA does not aspire to be a partisan group, both attitudes and practices will have to shift if the CTSA is to become the place where all perspectives within Catholic theology in North America are welcome."

The society sent the report to members Oct. 4, along with a letter from CTSA president Richard Gaillardetz, the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College.

In his letter, Gaillardetz states that while the society's 10-member board of directors does not agree with all of the report's findings, they believe it "raises legitimate concerns that demand our Society's attention."

"As a professional society, we are bound to consider the issues highlighted in the committee report with the utmost seriousness," Gaillardetz states. "The Catholic Theological Society of America should aspire to be a 'big tent' professional society that models in its attitudes and policies a commitment to the full catholicity of our theological tradition."

Gaillardetz tells his members that their board has approved six new guidelines in response to the report, including:

- Taking theological diversity into account when planning plenary speakers, respondents, and small-group sessions at meetings and conventions;
- Considering "the advantages of a theologically diverse leadership" when voting for board members;
- Using a "hermeneutic of generosity" when listening to others, refraining "from calling into question the good faith of others," and being respectful when criticizing church doctrine or each other.

The chair of the committee that authored the recent report told *NCR* Oct. 14 that it is one of several reports the society has authored in recent years.

"This is a sort of ordinary self-reflection that any academic society really needs to do periodically and that we have done in the past for other groups that have felt marginalized," said Daniel Finn, a professor of theology at St. John's University in Minnesota. The society, Finn said, has done similar studies on its inclusion of female members and those of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

"We just need to raise consciousness and alter some of our assumed procedures," said Finn, who served as CTSA president in 2006-2007. The goal, he said, is to make the society "a place where Catholic theologians of all points of view will feel welcome."

The society's 2014 annual conference, to be held in June in San Diego, will include a panel discussion on the society's theological diversity, Gaillardetz says in his letter. That session will be hosted by Charity Sr. Susan Wood, theology department chair at Marquette University in Milwaukee and the society's president-elect.

A similar session at this year's assembly, held in Miami, had the second-highest attendance of any session at the four-day event, Gaillardetz wrote.

The society's 2012 statement in the Farley case said the group was "especially concerned" the Vatican's criticism of her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* presented a limited understanding of the role of a theologian.

At the 2011 CTSA assembly, members voted 147 to one to support Johnson, saying the society "deeply regrets" the U.S. bishops did not follow established protocols for dialogue with theologians in their criticism of Johnson's book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

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