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U.S. theologian rebuts charges of dissension

Deborah Gyapong Catholic News Service | Oct. 5, 2009

OTTAWA -- The U.S. theologian invited to address the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' plenary in mid-October has rebutted online charges that he is a "liberal dissenter."

In a five-page letter to the bishops' conference president, Archbishop V. James Weisgerber, a Catholic studies professor at the University of Toledo, Ohio, Richard Gaillardetz, said the online attack involved "a very selective marshaling of isolated texts for the purpose of creating an ideological caricature."

In the letter, dated Sept. 25, Gaillardetz responded to points raised in Ottawa social conservative activist John Pacheco's Socon-or-bust Sept. 21 blog post, where the "liberal dissenter" accusation was first made. LifeSiteNews.com has followed up with similar stories.

Pacheco, who organized the 2005 March for Marriage on Parliament Hill, criticized Gaillardetz for having "blasted and disparaged the Holy Father" over the lifting of the Society of St. Pius X bishops' excommunication; for being a member of U.S. President Barack Obama's Catholic advisory board; and for supporting the ordination of women priests, among other charges.

Gaillardetz has written 100 articles and seven books for different audiences, so he told Archbishop Weisgerber it would be easy to "selectively cite isolated passages from my work in order to create a distorted portrait of widespread dissent."

He said he was in good standing with the Catholic Church in the United States, having received a "mandatum," or church mandate to teach, from now-retired Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston when he began a 10-year appointment at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston. That "mandatum" is portable, he said, and the bishop of Toledo has made no effort to revoke it. Gaillardetz listed the names of many bishops with whom he had worked closely and who would vouch for him.

Gaillardetz admitted he did criticize the handling of the traditionalist bishops' controversy but noted that a person can show "due respect while also questioning certain prudential actions taken by the pope and/or Vatican staff."

Gaillardetz said he joined Obama's Catholic advisory board as a result of a "carefully considered prudential judgment." After considering Catholic social teaching, he concluded Obama would be the best presidential candidate to "further central Catholic convictions across a broad range of issues."

"I did not support President Obama's position on abortion," he stressed, noting that he and others on the board repeatedly raised their opposition to his stand. Gaillardetz said he believes they were successful in mitigating Obama's views. He said the president's recent speech before both houses of Congress, in which he pledged no federal funds to support abortion and promised conscience-clause protection for health care workers, is evidence of that.

"Of course other Catholics may believe that my prudential judgment to support Obama was in error, but this judgment did not constitute a break with the church's doctrinal teaching in any way," he wrote.

Gaillardetz said he has never challenged the truth of the church's stand on the ordination of women, but examined issues of infallibility concerning the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement on the issue.

He also said he supported and taught the church's teachings against artificial contraception in "Humanae Vitae," contrary to online charges.

Gaillardetz said the role of a theologian is different from that of a catechist.

"The task of a theologian will at times stand in a fruitful and constructive tension with the task of the magisterium, but both play important, albeit quite different roles in the life of the church," he wrote.

"A theologian's work must at times be critical -- critical of certain theological trajectories, critical of certain ecclesiastical structures and practices, even critical of doctrinal formulations (distinguished from the deposit of faith) -- but this critical role must be undertaken in the context of a real humility before the mystery of the revelation of Christ's love for us in Jesus Christ and a genuine respect for the teaching office of the church," he wrote.

Gaillardetz will be giving two talks to the Canadian bishops as they gather for their annual plenary Oct. 19-23. The award-winning author will speak on the impact of the Second Vatican Council on the priesthood and on the relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the baptized. His talks, during the public portion of the plenary, will help the bishops mark the Year for Priests.

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