

US bishops rebuke Creighton theologians

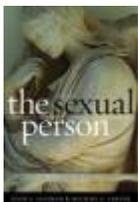
John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 24, 2010



Todd A. Salzman (CNS/Courtesy of Creighton University)

Two theologians at Creighton University, a Jesuit-run school in Omaha, Neb., have been sharply rebuked by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for defending the moral legitimacy of homosexuality, contraception, premarital sex, and other hot-button issues in sexual ethics.

The theologians, Michael Lawler and Todd Salzman, had been previously censured in 2007 by Omaha's then-archbishop, Elden Curtiss, for articles that, according to Curtiss, expressed "serious error ... [that] cannot be considered authentic Catholic teaching." The Sept. 15 statement from the doctrine committee reaches the same conclusion about a 2008 book by Lawler and Salzman titled *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*.



"The book proposes ways of living a Christian life that do not accord with the teaching of the church and the Christian tradition," the statement says.

Salzman is the chair of Creighton's theology department, while Lawler is now an emeritus professor.

In the Catholic theological guild, their work has often drawn sympathetic reviews. In a 2009 essay for the *National Catholic Reporter*, Julie Hanlon Rubio of the Jesuits' St. Louis University said that *The Sexual Person* is "[among the most important works in Catholic sexual ethics to emerge in the last two decades](#) [1]," and that the authors "stand firmly within the Catholic tradition even as they argue for significant change."

The Sexual Person also earned first-place honors in the books in theology category from the Catholic Press Association.

The doctrine committee does not impose disciplinary measures, and the current archbishop of Omaha, George Lucas, has expressed "confidence" that Creighton will handle the situation "in a manner consistent with the

mission of a Catholic university.? A statement from the university said Creighton is committed to both Catholic doctrine and academic freedom, and thanked Lucas for fostering a ?positive working relationship.?

A university spokesperson said she had no other information about what steps Creighton might take, and Salzman declined a request for comment.

The Committee on Doctrine is currently chaired by Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington. In its 24-page statement, the committee faulted Lawler and Salzman for their treatment both of scripture and of natural law. Their approach, it said, represents ?a radical departure from the Catholic theological tradition.?

Published by Georgetown University Press, *The Sexual Person* argues for more accepting positions on a wide range of controversial issues. The broad aim is to offer a ?person-centered? morality that the authors contrast with a more physical approach grounded in traditional understandings of natural law.

With regard to scripture, the doctrinal committee statement accuses Lawler and Salzman of falling into ?historical relativism? by suggesting that biblical injunctions on sexuality reflect the particular socio-historical assumptions of the authors.

By insisting that ?nature? is also socially constructed, the doctrine committee statement asserts, the only thing Lawler and Salzman leave intact about natural law is the name.

?The root of the problem here is philosophical, an epistemology distorted by skepticism,? the statement says.

Issues of sexual morality, according to the statement, ?should be thoroughly studied and discussed by theologians as part of their service to the church and to society,? but those efforts ?can only bear fruit if they are in fact carried on within a hermeneutic of continuity and in the framework provided by the Catholic theological tradition and the teaching of the church.?

As of Sept. 23, it was not clear whether Lawler and Salzman might be subject to a review from the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In recent years, the congregation has preferred that corrections of theologians on issues where the Vatican has already spoken about the underlying principles come from the local bishop or from the national bishops? conference.

Editor's Note: NCR reviewed *The Sexual Person* in February 2009. The book review is online [here](#). [1]



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