NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Theologians criticize bishops' handling of book critique

Thomas C. Fox | Apr. 8, 2011

Mary Ann Hinsdale, CTSA president

The board of directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America issued a statement April 8 faulting the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine for not following the bishops? own established guidelines in assessing a book by one of the society?s more prominent members.

The statement took issue with the committee for not having contacted Fordham University professor of theology St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson during its study of her book *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, a popular theology text.

?We are greatly disturbed that the Doctrine Committee did not follow the approved procedures of [the 1989 U.S. bishops? conference document] ?Doctrinal Responsibilities,? which advocate that an informal conversation be undertaken as a first step,? the statement read.

The Catholic Theological Society board?s statement charged that the Doctrine Committee?s assessment of Johnson?s book is ?deficient? because it misrepresents the line of thinking presented in the book.

?Professor Johnson is faulted repeatedly for holding the position that God is ?unknowable? on the grounds that she maintains that our human words cannot completely capture the divine reality,? the society?s statement read. ?This judgment takes shape ? by ascribing to professor Johnson the view that none of our words about God can be truthful. ?

?This is a surprising leap in logic, not warranted by Professor Johnson?s modest, and quite traditionally Catholic, claim that our human words cannot completely capture the divine reality.?

Finally, the board said it is ?troubled? that the committee?s criticism of Johnson?s work ?seems to reflect a very narrow understanding of the theological task.?

?Theologians throughout history have promulgated the riches of the Catholic tradition by venturing new ways to imagine and express the mystery of God and the economy of salvation revealed in Scripture and Tradition,? the

statement said.

It concluded with a strong affirmation of Johnson, a past president of the society and a holder of 13 honorary doctorates.

?She is a person of the highest character, a respected theologian and teacher who pursues her theological vocation as service to the church.?

Ten board members signed the statement.

Full text of the statement follows:

Response of the Board of Directors
of the Catholic Theological Society of America to the Statement
on *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*,
By Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson Issued by the Committee on Doctrine,
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, March 24, 2011.

We, the undersigned officers and directors of the Catholic Theological Society of America wish to comment on the statement by the USCCB Committee on Doctrine, which was made public on March 31, 2011. Our intent here is to voice our serious concerns regarding three issues: 1) the fact that, in this matter, the bishops did not follow the procedures set forth in their own document, Doctrinal Responsibilities; 2) a misreading of Professor Johnson?s work in the statement; 3) the troubling implications the statement presents for the exercise of our vocation as theologians.

It is not our intention here to comment in detail on the Doctrine Committee?s statement or on Professor Johnson?s book, since responsible consideration deserves greater time and thought. However, we feel an urgency to respond since her book has received such a wide and favorable reception from so many educated Catholic laity, including from the students many of us teach. In sharing this pastoral concern, we are conscious of the complementary but distinct vocations of the theologian and the Magisterium and are open to further conversation with the Committee on Doctrine regarding the understanding of our theological task.

1. Procedures
In 1983 Doctrinal Responsibilities was unanimously approved by both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Canon Law Society of America. It was further refined by the Bishops? Committee on Doctrine and formally approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1989. Under the heading ?Ecclesial Responsibilities? (which considers the responsibilities and rights of both bishops and theologians) it states: ?It is inevitable that misunderstandings about the teaching of the gospel and the ways of expressing it will arise. In such cases, informal conversation ought to be the first step towards resolution.?

Professor Johnson?s response to the Doctrine Committee indicates that no discussion with her took place before the statement was published: ?I would have been glad to enter into conversation to clarify critical points but was never invited to do so. This book was discussed and finally assessed by the Committee before I knew any discussion had taken place.?

We are greatly disturbed that the Doctrine Committee did not follow the approved procedures of Doctrinal Responsibilities which advocate that an informal conversation be undertaken as a first step. Despite this procedural lapse, we applaud Professor Johnson?s willingness to begin a dialogue with the bishops.

2. Misreading

We believe that the statement is deficient in the way it presents Professor Johnson?s work. Professor Johnson is faulted repeatedly for holding the position that God is ?unknowable? on the grounds that she maintains that our human words cannot completely capture the divine reality. This judgment takes shape in the statement by ascribing to Professor Johnson the view that none of our words about God can be truthful (8). The statement concludes that since God?s divine revelation is found in truthful words, Professor Johnson presents an understanding of God that is incompatible with the Catholic tradition, ?for it effectively precludes the possibility of human knowledge of God through divine revelation and reduces all names and concepts of God to human constructions ?? (20).

This is a surprising leap in logic, not warranted by Professor Johnson?s modest, and quite traditionally Catholic, claim that our human words cannot completely capture the divine reality. It is difficult for us to imagine that Professor Johnson, who has written so elegantly and movingly about the divine mystery throughout her career, lacks a heartfelt intention to say something modestly truthful about God based on God?s revelation in Scripture and Tradition.

3. The Theological Task

Finally, we are troubled that this criticism of Professor Johnson?s work seems to reflect a very narrow understanding of the theological task. Theologians throughout history have promulgated the riches of the Catholic tradition by venturing new ways to imagine and express the mystery of God and the economy of salvation revealed in Scripture and Tradition. This is a Catholic style of theological reflection that very many Catholic theologians continue to practice today. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) is especially eloquent on this responsibility:

From the beginning of its history [the church] has learned to express Christ?s message in the concepts and languages of various peoples, and it has also tried to throw light on it through the wisdom of philosophers, aiming so far as was proper to suit the gospel to the grasp of everyone as well as to the expectations of the wise. This adaptation in preaching the revealed word should remain the law of all evangelisation.? It is for God?s people as a whole, with the help of the holy Spirit, and especially for pastors and theologians, to listen to the various voices of our day, discerning them and interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the divine word, so that the revealed truth can be increasingly appropriated, better understood and more suitably expressed. (#44)

Such endeavors, which theologians offer in service to and love for the Church, should be encouraged by all in the Church. To suggest that a theologian who engages in the difficult task of interpreting revelation for present times and cultures is denying the knowability of the very revelation?the Word of God?that theological reflection takes as its authoritative source, strikes us as a fundamental misunderstanding of the ecclesial vocation of the theologian.

In conclusion, we wish to affirm that Professor Johnson is a most esteemed member of our Society. She is a person of the highest character, a respected theologian and teacher who pursues her theological vocation as service to the Church.

Signed,
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- **Bishops ignored own guidelines in Johnson critique** [1], April 7, 2011
- **Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion** [2], March 31, 2011
- **U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian** [3], March 30, 2011
- Shortly after Johnson's book *The Quest for the Living God* was published, she discussed it with *NCR* editor Tom Fox. Their discussion was posted to the NCR web site as a two part podcast: **Elizabeth Johnson and the Quest for the Living God** [4]
- Fox's review of that book is here: **A hunger for mature theology** [5]
- In August 2008, Johnson addressed a joint assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, the main umbrella groups for women?s and men?s orders

in the United States, meeting in Denver. *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. covered the event and filed this story:
Theologian Elizabeth Johnson: 'Drench anger with forgiveness' [6]

- The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at: www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm [7]

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