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Will Elizabeth Johnson's accusers please step forward?

Donald Cozzens | Apr. 27, 2011

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COMMENTARY

J?accuse!

Fordham University?s Distinguished Professor of Theology, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, stands in the dock, so to speak. Accused by an undisclosed number of individual U.S. bishops of failing to reflect clearly the church?s teaching on God in her 2007 book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops? Committee on Doctrine seconded the original accusation. There were, indeed, the doctrine committee found, serious problems with Johnson?s book on God (NCR, March 31).

I read *Quest for the Living God* soon after it was published. As with many of her previous works, I remembered the author?s gift for taking rather sleepy church doctrines and bringing them to life. Deeply rooted in our faith?s tradition, Johnson engaged these truths, plumbed their depths, wrestled with their mystery, and presented them afresh to her readers. Hers was not only a world-class intelligence, but a world-class imagination steeped in the church?s history, theology and spirituality. I so wanted to hear this theologian preach.

There it was, resting peacefully on the bookshelf above my desk. I remembered that I had found *Quest for the Living God* an engaging read as I reached up and plucked it from its narrow berth nestled among her other acclaimed books. Sure enough, almost every page had little yellow Post-it flags signaling passages that had made their mark on my own theological imagination.

I?m now reading *Quest for the Living God* for a second time and it occurs to me that it would be interesting, to say the least, to listen in should Johnson and the bishops? Committee on Doctrine ever engage in a discussion of her work on the mystery of God. NCR reports that Johnson would welcome such a discussion (*NCR*, April 11). And *NCR*?s Tom Fox promises to make the transcript available to interested readers.

But there are others who should be involved in this discussion. It should include not only the Committee on Doctrine, but also those unnamed bishops who accused Johnson?s book of being dangerous to Catholic teaching.

Alas, we don?t know who these bishops are. We know only that the Committee on Doctrine began its review of *Quest for the Living God* because some bishops complained that the popular book was seriously problematic. It

would be of interest to know not only how many bishops accused her ? two, three, 23? ? but who these bishops are. I think Johnson has a right to know her accusers.

It seems only fair to me ? and especially to Johnson.

It looks like the Committee on Doctrine believes accusers should be privileged to remain anonymous. That policy seems strangely out of step in contemporary society ? even out of step in a closed society like the church.

A number of questions come to mind.

Did the accusing bishops read *Quest for the Living God* from cover to cover? Sometimes, I?ve heard, some bishops rely on their in-house theologians to read theological works and bring summaries of suspected errors to their attention. That?s fair enough. Bishops are busy with countless administrative and pastoral responsibilities. But when a theologically questionable book is brought to their attention, I think they should read it before calling it to the attention of the doctrine committee. Perhaps they did. It seems to me that?s the adult thing to do.

Did the accusing bishops ever think of contacting Johnson directly at her Fordham University office for clarification and/or conversation before asking the Committee on Doctrine to investigate her work? It seems to me that?s the adult thing to do.

Soon after the censure of her book was made public, Johnson indicated her readiness to meet with the members of the doctrine committee to discuss her book. Shouldn?t the bishops welcome such a conversation? It seems to me that?s the adult thing to do.

We should take little consolation that during the Inquisition of the 13th century, individuals suspected of theological errors were regularly subjected to grueling interrogation ? read torture ? and sometimes death at the stake without knowing the individual or individuals who were their accusers. This is the 21st century and we might hope the church has learned a few things in the meantime.

For the bishops who accused Johnson, I have a thought. Step out from behind the sanctuary of your chancery desks and identify yourselves. Johnson is ready to sit down with you for a serious conversation about the mystery of the living God.

It seems to me that?s the adult thing to do.

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