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New from Netflix: Inquisition II at Fordham

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 10, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

The currently ill-timed, ill-stated, and certainly ill-advised critique of Fordham theologian Elizabeth Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God*, is a remake of a slasher movie that Catholics have seen many times. You know the one in which the monster, thought slain in the original film, rises and returns to his pursuit of the innocent. Note that "Inquisition II" contains violence and may not be suitable for younger viewers.

In slasher films the victim is always an innocent woman who is unaware that someone awash with unnamable urgings is watching her, stalking her and staking out her routine to learn when she is most vulnerable. Then in the dark, always in the dark, he strikes her and escapes back into his surface respectability.

Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, however, is too healthy a person and too accomplished a scholar to be taken, much less done in by the attack made on her literally and metaphorically in the dark by the U.S. Bishops Committee on Doctrine through its deputy, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy.

Johnson has written a restrained and scholarly response [1] to the slasher-like assault on her work, revealing that she is healthier than either the attack or the attackers, smarter, too, that's what really kills them about her.

This new version is loosely based on "Inquisition I" that depicted the unhealthy activities that abounded in the Plague Years of the Inquisition, the same ones recently identified by Jason Berry as "structural mendacity" and by Hans Kung as "sickness" in the Church.

"Inquisition II" may lack the medieval production values of "Inquisition I" but it retains its pathologically demeaning dynamics. These betray the bishops who want to do the right thing if they can see it, the people who are the Church who know the wrong thing when they see it, and the calling of theologians. The bishops have been led to confuse theology with doctrine and so are made to seem uninformed about theology's task of seeking to understand ever more deeply and in ever more accurate language the teachings of the Church.

Johnson calmly and undefensively writes that, "Ideas are taken out of context and twisted to mean what they patently do not mean. Sentences are run to a conclusion far from what I think or the text says ?. *Quest for A Living God* was thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented ?. The statement's judgment that *Quest* does not cohere with Catholic teaching is less than compelling. It hangs in the air, untethered by the text of the book itself."

The embarrassing result was that Cardinal Donald Wuerl . chair of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, stepped onto the swaying bridge of the accusations only to plunge his foot through its reed structure and into his own mouth at the same time. Apparently never having heard of Instant Replay, he claimed that the bishops are to be considered "umpires" in an analogy I'll bet he wouldn't choose again because it reduces theology to a spectator sport.

Wuerl thinks the solution is to return to the *imprimatur*, once sought from bishops before a theological work could be printed, which is like warring on vampires by opening a blood bank. Wuerl must have been getting his

lines from the movie script when he stated that the supervision of the bishops is needed because we have "a generation or more of Catholics ? who have little solid intellectual formation in their faith." One feels compassion for the cardinal as, in an effort to bolster the teaching authority of the bishops, he diminishes it and unintentionally embarrasses himself by insulting a theologically sophisticated generation of Catholics who know at least as much, and probably more theology than the bishops who may have signed off on this horror movie scenario not because they read it but because they thought it was the right thing, that is, their duty to do so..

They have been as ill-served by their supposedly official theologian as Johnson has been falsely accused by him. Here we clearly observe the twisted institutional dynamic that exercises power over by demeaning and humiliating others, by silencing them and sending them off as scapegoats for imagined sins. This is the dynamic we have seen in the treatment of other theologians or in simple corruptions of pastoral service when people are rudely treated when they are trying to arrange their marriage; it is, sadly and tragically, the institutional dynamic of the still unresolved world-wide sex abuse crisis.

Weinandy probably does not understand how he played a role in this horror remake. Otherwise he would not have allowed himself to be the agent of an in-the-dark-without-warning attack designed to humiliate and demean publicly a distinguished woman theologian. Nor would he give the impression of magisterial self-satisfaction in sponsoring the condemnation of Johnson's work and then stating that he never meant to question her [2] "dedication, honor, creativity, or service."

Well, you can credit Weinandy with transparency. You can see right through his post-attack remarks to the heart of this darkness. "Inquisition II" is a sick movie, featuring the humiliation and demeaning of an innocent victim, followed by a hollow piety of denying that anybody intended to do anything hurtful.

My Aunt Margaret, displeased by the way women were portrayed on a daytime radio drama, wrote to the sponsors, asking, "Do you think we women are damned fools?" If she were still alive, she would ask the same question of Weinandy who wrote this screenplay and the bishops who played bit parts in this unfortunate film. Where was the Legion of Decency when the bishops needed it? We can hardly wait to hear the bishops discuss this at their forthcoming meeting in Seattle.

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