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

Johnson: Cardinal's claim she refused contact 'blatantly false'

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 31, 2011

Cardinal Donald Wuerl's claim, posted on the U.S. bishops' conference website [1], that his invitations to meet with Sr. Elizabeth Johnson about her book *Quest for the Living God* went unanswered are "demonstrably and blatantly false," the noted theologian said in a letter sent to the cardinal Sunday.

The letter, first obtained by *Commonweal* and posted on their blog [2], is a reply to an Oct. 28 news release posted on the bishops' website. The release claims Wuerl, who is the head of the bishops' doctrine committee, attempted to meet with Johnson three times since the committee publicly critiqued her book last spring, but that Johnson "did not respond to any of the offers."

In her letter to the cardinal, Johnson says she is "aghast at the accusation you make in the USCCB website post that I have not responded to any of the offers to meet."

"I never received an offer to meet at a definite time or with a protocol or agenda that would ensure serious discussion of the issues in my book. If I had, I would have accepted immediately," writes Johnson. "In addition, each offer was vague about time, indicating that a meeting would take place after the committee?s deliberations were over."

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, spokesperson for the U.S. bishops' conference, declined to comment on the back and forth exchange between Wuerl and Johnson.

"The cardinal has made his observations about [the communication]," said Walsh. "[Johnson] has made hers. He's not going to say anything further."

Johnson confirmed the authenticity of her Oct. 30 letter in an email.

Johnson's book, which was first critiqued by the bishops' doctrine committee in March for not being in "accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points," was reaffirmed as "inadequate as a presentation of the Catholic understanding of God" in a statement from the committee Oct. 28.

In a response to the bishops issued the same day, Johnson said she lamented the fact that her attempts to meet with members of the committee were rebuffed.

Wuerl's Oct. 28 statement seemed to refute that claim, saying the cardinal had attempted to contact Johnson on July 22, Oct. 11, and Oct. 26 to no avail.

A series of letters and e-mails between Wuerl and Johnson posted on the *Commonweal* website, however, seem to show that the theologian made several attempts to meet with the cardinal, responded to each of his communications, and was only contacted for possible meetings after statements by the bishops' doctrine committee regarding her book had already been drafted.

The most recent back and forth exchange between Johnson and Wuerl began with a mailed letter from the

cardinal to the theologian, dated Oct. 11.

Johnson, who is on sabbatical from her position as a professor of systematic theology at Fordham University this semester and is not working from her office at the university, where the letter was sent, did not immediately receive it

In an Oct. 26 e-mail to Fr Adam Park, Wuerl's secretary, Johnson explained that while on sabbatical, she only received letters once a week when they are collected and sent from her office to her house.

Moreover, Johnson says in that e-mail, Wuerl's letter did not request a meeting before the doctrine committee's statement would be made public Oct. 28, but only vaguely referred to a possible meeting in the future.

"In earlier correspondence, you and I spoke about the possibility of meeting in person," Johnson's e-mail quotes Wuerl's letter. "I renew my offer to meet with you if you so desire."

That statement, Johnson says in the e-mail, has "no timing" set for their possible meeting. "When I read it," Johnson writes, "I took it to mean the cardinal's door was open for a meeting someday."

In her Oct. 30 letter to Wuerl, Johnson also outlines several other times she has contacted the cardinal about a possible meeting. She also reached out to the cardinal July 14, she says, after she had received a letter acknowledging the bishops had received her June response to their condemnation of her book.

?I assure you explicitly of my willingness to meet face-to-face to clarify these matters, and in fact would like to do so, should you deem that helpful," Johnson wrote in that letter.

In his July 22 reply to that letter, Johnson writes, Wuerl said he "would welcome the opportunity" to meet with the theologian and would contact her again after a September meeting of the doctrine committee.

That vague wording, Johnson says, led her to believe the committee "would deliberate without meeting me" and that Wuerl would "meet with me afterwards."

Closing her Oct. 30 letter, Johnson writes: "To say you tried to reach me by phone and e-mail and I did not respond is demonstrably and blatantly false."

Johnson urges Wuerl to remove the Oct. 28 release from the bishops' conference web site. "For the sake of your own reputation for truth-telling, and for the good of the church, which does not need any more controversy, I urge you to take down this post."

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

Related coverage from*NCR*:

- **Johnson: Bishops' latest 'paints incorrect picture' of book** **[3]**, Oct. 28, 2011
- **Bishops reaffirm: ?Quest for Living God? not adequate theology** [4], Oct. 28, 2011
- **'Doctrinal Responsibilities': evenhanded, open and fair** **[5]**, Oct. 21, 2011
- **Leading committee authorized rebuke** **[6]**, Aug. 2, 2011
- **Bishops' staffer on doctrine rips theologians as 'curse'** **[7]**, Aug. 16, 2011
- **Theologians' meeting sets tone of reconciliation** **[8]**, June 21, 2011
- **Bishops' response to rebuked theologian could take months** **[9]**, June 16, 2011
- **Bishops to discuss Johnson's defense of her 2007 book** **[10]**, June 6, 2011
- **College Theology Society backs Fordham theologian** **[11]**, April 19, 2011
- **Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion** [12], March 31, 2011

- **U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian** [13], 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 [14]
- Fox's review of that book is here: **A hunger for mature theology** [15]
- 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' [16]
- The text of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's address is on the LCWR website at:
  www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm [17]

Source URL (retrieved on *03/12/2014 - 06:06*): http://ncronline.org/news/johnson-cardinals-claim-she-refused-contact-blatantly-false

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/news/2011/11-207.cfm
[2] http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=15712
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/27323/
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/27317/
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/26977/
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/25965/
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/26179/
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/25248/
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/25196/
[10] http://ncronline.org/node/25021/
[11] http://ncronline.org/node/24158/
[12] http://ncronline.org/node/23793/
[13] http://ncronline.org/node/23780
[14] http://ncronline.org/node/14798
[15] http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/hunger-mature-theology
[16] http://ncronline.org/node/1551
[17] http://www.lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/2008assembly.htm