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

Canon lawyers step into Johnson saga

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 9, 2011

The logo of the Canon Law Society of America (Taken from their website)

The head of the U.S. bishops' conference, Archbishop Timothy Dolan, received a letter Friday, Dec. 9 from the Canon Law Society of America offering to help the bishops develop their processes for investigations of theologians.

The letter was written in response to criticism of the process the bishops' Committee on Doctrine used to evaluate and subsequently condemn a book by St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, earlier this year.

Mercy Sr. Sharon Euart, the society's executive coordinator, confirmed the existence of the letter in a phone interview with *NCR* this morning. The letter was written by society president Rita Joyce on behalf of the some 1,300 canon lawyers represented by the group.

Bishops' conference spokeswoman Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh said the canon law society's letter had arrived at Dolan's office today. She said that Dolan would likely forward the letter to the Committee on Doctrine since "competence in that matter" is with that committee.

While today's letter has not been made public, Euart said it was the result of a resolution passed by the society at its annual meeting in October. That resolution was printed in the September edition of the society's quarterly newsletter, which is available online [1].

The back and forth between Johnson and the bishops has "focused attention on the need for appropriate procedures for ... investigations of the writings of theologians," the resolution says. The Canon Law Society's board of governors "offers the services of the Society to the USCCB to assist in formulating appropriate procedures for the conduct of investigations into the work of theologians in the United States."

Vincentian Fr. Michael Joyce, who stepped down as the society's president at the October meeting, said in a phone interview that the group wanted to offer assistance to the bishops to be sure there is "a beneficial structure in place that will assist the ... conference when there are doctrinal questions."

The resolution notes that the society had previously helped the bishops' conference develop a 1989 document, titled "Doctrinal Responsibilities," that outlined guidelines for the handling of doctrinal disputes between bishops and theologians.

While that document was geared toward disputes between diocesan bishops and theologians and not for the bishops' conference as a whole, Fr. Joyce said, the society has a "certain expertise that we can offer" if the bishops wished to develop a new process.

Fr. Joyce also referred to a July 7 letter from Dolan to the Catholic Theological Society of America on the Johnson situation. In that letter, Dolan said "we bishops should always be mindful of improving the manner in which we engage theologians in a necessary discussion of their work."

Fr. Joyce said it seemed the archbishop "welcomed any help that could be given to the conference" in that regard.

News of the letter comes four days after the College Theology Society, which represents undergraduate theology faculty, expressed "sadness and grave concern" over the latest statement regarding Johnson's book from the bishops' Committee on Doctrine.

That statement from the doctrine committee, released in late October, reconfirmed a March condemnation of the book which said it "completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel."

The theology society's Dec. 5 statement [2] said the bishops' condemnations represent a "fundamental breach" in the call for dialogue in the church as the bishops went forward "without entering into a process of dialogue with [Johnson] about the issues being raised."

The theology society's statement, signed by its seven board members and four officers and addressed to the society's membership, expresses "sadness and grave concern" over the bishops' October statement because the bishops went forward "without entering into a process of dialogue with [Johnson] about the issues being raised."

"The course of action taken by the Committee on Doctrine represents a fundamental breach in the call for dialogue within the church and in particular between theologians and bishops, a call that is one of the hallmarks of the documents of the Second Vatican Council," reads the statement, which was posted to the society's website.

Fr. Joyce said the offer to help the bishops' conference is similar to others the society has made in the past. He said the society had also offered to help Cardinal Donald Wuerl, the head of the bishops' doctrine committee, as he was setting up the new Anglican ordinariate, a church structure to help bring interested Anglicans into the Catholic church.

"In past history, we've often worked with the conference in doing these kinds of things," said Fr. Joyce. "There's a good tradition behind it."

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

Source URL (retrieved on *07/11/2014 - 23:13*): http://ncronline.org/news/canon-lawyers-step-johnson-saga

Links:
[1] http://www.clsa.org/resource/resmgr/newsletters/1109newsletter.pdf
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/27963