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NCR chooses 2011's person of the year

NCR Editorial Staff | Dec. 30, 2011

The year 2011 offered the Catholic world a number of big news stories: the implosion of the church in Ireland; the first indictments of Catholic leaders, including a bishop, in the tragic clergy sex abuse saga; the initiation of reform movements by Catholics priests in Ireland, Austria, Germany, United States and Belgium; and the Vatican-forced implementation of the new Roman Missal.

Among the *NCR* headline-grabbing stories was one seemingly smaller and in some ways more personal story. Yet it had significant meaning and holds long-range consequences. It was the perplexing news story of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee's condemnation of a 2007 book by Fordham University theologian St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson. At the heart of the severe condemnation (approved by the U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee) of *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* is an unresolved theological conflict that revealed a rift between mainstream Catholic theologians and U.S. bishops.

These conflicts, while not new, have solidified as a generation of theologically conservative, Pope John Paul II-appointed bishops that have come into the top leadership positions in the U.S. hierarchy. Seldom has the theologian/bishop rift been on display so publically as it has been in the criticisms and defenses involved in the episcopal *Quest for the Living God* assessment.

Few could have imagined the ruckus the book would one day cause when it was first published in October 2007. The publisher at the time noted Christian faith does not believe in a new God but, finding itself in new situations, seeks the presence of God there. The book would explore that presence. Not a strictly academic undertaking, *Quest for the Living God* was rather aimed at a larger audience. It was a deliberate effort to engage students and others hungry for substantive Catholic theological and spiritual guidance. It aimed to find God's presence in our multidimensional, contemporary world. *Quest for the Living God* was well-received, especially among teaching Catholic theologians, who quickly added it to their syllabuses.

Few could also imagine Johnson cast as theological rebel. A former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, she is deeply respected among her colleagues. She has a reputation for being a faith-filled and meticulous scholar. In this context, the Committee on Doctrine's chapter-by-chapter, searing March critique of *Quest for the Living God* took Catholic academia by surprise. The committee found Johnson's book marred by "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors." It found the work "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points." To their credit, the bishops did not call for disciplinary measures. However, their

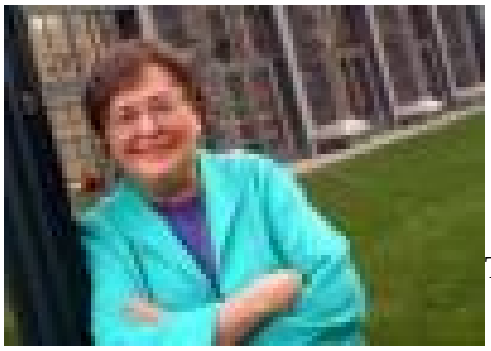
condemnation came without ever having offered her the decency of comment or defense.

Far from having buttressed the work of a faithful Catholic scholar, a soul mate by most any measure, they sowed doubt and exposed her to Catholic extremists -- few in number but capable of capturing public attention -- who have little, if any, inklings or care about the nature of theology and its critical place within the church.

Following the condemnation, Johnson said little, but noted in her low-key manner that "simple human courtesy would indicate that springing such a public critique without warning is neither a generous nor respectful way to treat an adult." That's an understatement, but characteristically Johnson in manner.

Meanwhile, the Fordham faculty rallied around her, as did the leadership of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society, each issuing supportive statements. The Canon Law Society of America offered to help the bishops refine their procedures.

The dispute offered a unique teaching moment. Drawing on higher angels, it seemed an opportunity to explore contemporary theology through personal exchanges, maybe even setting a Christian example. It was not to be. In October, the bishops' doctrine committee reaffirmed its earlier critique, again without having met the theologian face-to-face.



The process -- or rather the lack of process -- in these unfortunate events speaks to a breakdown in dialogue that begs attention for the health of our church. This might have been grounds alone for choosing this controversy as "story of the year." But the conflicted saga is not the sole reason *NCR* believes this story to be important. As the editors discussed the matter, what began to dominate our discussion was not simply the issue of a bungled process, but also the importance of the thrust and content of Johnson's theology.

Much of *Quest* is a re-presentation of what other well-respected theologians have said and continue to say about "the living God" today. Borrowing from the deceased German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, Johnson wrote in her rebuttal to the bishops that the goal of theology is "to seek the meaning of faith in order to believe, hope and love more deeply." To expect God seekers to simply repeat old formulations neglects reality and the rich offerings that have come to the Catholic table in the past half century of advances in theology. Johnson, meanwhile, has offered powerful images of the divine; they speak to seekers everywhere. The uncommon popularity of Quest for the Living God bears this out.

Beneath the Johnson controversy and vision rests an undeniably broader emerging issue that all our church leaders must face honestly: the feminine/masculine specter that shadows many discussions about church authority. Arguably some of the greatest awakenings in Christian theology in the past half century have come with the advent of women theologians. Until the mid-20th century, Catholic theology, with a few notable exceptions, was a man's world, almost entirely a priest's world. Centuries of depictions of God were painted through male eyes. Long absent feminine insights accompanied women into schools of theology, where they began to study and examine God through a new lens. Sadly, these precious feminine insights still threaten some. This should not be the case. God created male and female; God created both in God's image and gave both

minds to explore the divine.

Quest for the Living God emphatically reminds us that God is engaged in our world and that Catholic theology, despite sometimes regressive pressures, remains active in our lives and in our church. Elizabeth Johnson, as theologian and signpost of the wider Catholic theological community, is, then, our *NCR* person of the year for 2011.

What did readers vote the top religion story of 2011? [1]

[This editorial will appear in the Jan. 6 issue of *NCR*. Subscribe [2].]

More stories on Sr. Elizabeth Johnson

- **Canon lawyers step into Johnson saga [3]**, Dec. 9, 2011
- **Scholars see 'breach' between bishops, theologians [4]**, Dec. 7, 2011
- **Theologian disputes claim she ignored dialogue invite [5]**, Nov. 7, 2011
- **Johnson: Bishops' latest 'paints incorrect picture' of book [6]**, Oct. 28, 2011
- **Bishops reaffirm: ?Quest for Living God? not adequate theology** [7], Oct. 28, 2011
- **'Doctrinal Responsibilities': evenhanded, open and fair [8]**, Oct. 21, 2011
- **Leading committee authorized rebuke [9]**, Aug. 2, 2011
- **Bishops' staffer on doctrine rips theologians as 'curse' [10]**, Aug. 16, 2011
- **Theologians' meeting sets tone of reconciliation [11]**, June 21, 2011
- **Bishops' response to rebuked theologian could take months [12]**, June 16, 2011
- **Bishops to discuss Johnson's defense of her 2007 book [13]**, June 6, 2011
- **College Theology Society backs Fordham theologian [14]**, April 19, 2011
- **Theologians criticize bishops' handling of book critique** [15], April 8, 2011
- **Bishops ignored own guidelines in Johnson critique** [16], April 7, 2011
- **Johnson: Bishops' condemnation came without discussion** [17], March 31, 2011
- **U.S. bishops blast book by feminist theologian** [18], 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** [19]
- Fox's review of that book is here: **A hunger for mature theology** [20]
- **Read a sample from Johnson's book** [21]

The Next Step FORWARD [22]

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