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Theological society endorses Farley, elects leadership

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CTSA members voting. (NCR photo/Joshua McElwee)

ST. LOUIS -- The largest membership organization of U.S. theologians voted overwhelmingly Friday to endorse a statement supporting Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, a member in their ranks who was the subject of harsh criticism from the Vatican just days ago.

By a show of hands, members of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) gave their support to a Thursday statement from the society?s leadership which said the group was ?especially concerned? that the Vatican?s criticism presents a limiting understanding of the role of Catholic theology.

Although no formal count of votes was taken, the number of the some 400 present supporting the measure was overwhelming, with only a few members either abstaining or not voting in support.

The vote, which came during the group?s 67th annual four-day convention, being held here this weekend, occurred during a ?business meeting? of the theologians gathered for the event.

During the meeting, the group present also elected new leadership and tabled ?indefinitely? a resolution expressing ?deep concern? regarding a controversial federal health care mandate, which the U.S. bishops have made the central part of a campaign for religious liberty.

In voting on the Farley matter, the theologians did not make any new statement on the case, but rather endorsed in totality a previous statement made by the CTSA?s ten-member board Thursday.

That statement, which does not debate the conclusions drawn by the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding Farley?s book *Just Love*, says the Vatican?s move ?risks giving the impression that there can be no constructive role in the life of the Church for works of theology? that attempt to:

1. ?give voice to the experience and concerns of ordinary believers;?
2. ?raise questions about the persuasiveness of certain official Catholic positions;? or,
3. ?offer alternative theological frameworks as potentially helpful contributions to the authentic development of doctrine.?

During Friday?s meeting, the theologians also considered a resolution proposed by eleven in their ranks that

expressed ?deep concern? regarding the Department of Health and Human Services mandate regarding the coverage of contraception in health care plans.

?While the society recognizes that differences of opinion exist in terms of the morality of contraception and sterilization, it also upholds religious liberty as well as the fundamental right of both individuals and institutions to not be forced to act contrary to their informed consciences,? read the resolution, which was tabled ?indefinitely? following a lengthy discussion on the matter.

?The society urges federal and state governments to exempt employers from funding or providing contraception and sterilization when such funding or provision directly violates the moral tenets of the employer?s religious tradition.?

During the discussion, several present urged the gathered theologians to dismiss the resolution, saying it was either too partisan for the group, or that the mandate did not represent a significant intrusion on religious liberty.

Following the vote on the Farley matter, the theologians also voted to elect Charity Sr. Susan Wood, the chair of the department of theology at Marquette University, as its new vice president.

According to the group?s bylaws, that means Wood is set to take the helm of the society in 2014. Wood replaces in the role Richard Gaillardetz, the McCarthy Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College, who assumes the role of president-elect of the group, and will take its helm in 2013.

The president of the society is currently John Thiel, a professor of religious studies at Fairfield University. He is set to be replaced Saturday by the current president-elect, Susan Ross, the chair of the department of theology at Loyola University Chicago.

CTSA Friday also named the honoree of its award for the best essay from a new theologian, named after Catherine Mowry LaCugna, a feminist theologian known widely for her book *God For Us.*

The award went to Anna Harrison, an assistant professor of religious studies at Loyola Marymount University for her essay ?Jesus Wept': Mourning as Imitation of Christ in Bernard's Sermon Twenty-Six on the Song of Songs.?

Announcing the award, Gary Macy, a professor at Santa Clara University, said one reviewer had said Harrison?s work ?speaks directly to an experience with which every human must deal.?

Friday?s meeting also saw Thiel describe a number of meetings CTSA leadership has had with U.S. bishops in the wake of last year?s condemnation of *Quest for the Living God*, a widely praised book by theologian and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson.

Describing those meetings, all of which have been previously reported, Thiel said: ?This year was an interesting one to serve as your president.?

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer.]

More stories from the CTSA convention:

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- **African theologian questions church?s exclusion of women**
- **Theological society membership endorses support for Farley, elects leaders [2]**
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