

Redemptorist priest: Vatican threatened excommunication for advocating discussion

John Cooney | Jan. 23, 2013

Dublin

Update: The head of the Redemptorist fathers in Rome said he deeply regrets that Flannery broke the silence he had been asked to observe, Catholic New Service reported Wednesday

Redemptorist Fr. Michael Brehl, the order's superior general, also confirmed that Flannery is under Vatican investigation for alleged ambiguities "regarding fundamental areas of Catholic doctrine, including the priesthood, the nature of the church and the Eucharist."

Brehl said he wanted to "earnestly invite" Flannery "to renew the efforts to find an agreed solution to the concerns raised by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

He also asked Irish Redemptorists to "join with me in praying and working together in the spirit of St. Alphonsus to maintain and strengthen our communion with the universal church."

PREVIOUS STORY

Irish Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery broke a year of silence Sunday to reveal that the Vatican had threatened him with excommunication and removal from his religious congregation because he advocates for open discussions about church teachings on ordaining women, clerical celibacy, contraceptives and homosexuality.

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith removed Flannery, 66, from public ministry last February, pending the outcome of its inquiries into views he expressed in *Reality*, a Redemptorist-run magazine.

Flannery also said he has had no direct contact in person or writing from the congregation. All communication has come through the Redemptorist superior general in Rome, Fr. Michael Brehl.

Flannery described the actions against him as "frightening, disproportionate and reminiscent of the Inquisition."

He said he initially tried to find a compromise with the Vatican congregation, but by September, it became clear this would not happen.

"I gradually became aware that the CDF continually raised the bar until it got to the point where I could no longer negotiate," Flannery said. "I was faced with a choice. Either I sign a statement, for publication, stating that I accepted teachings that I could not accept, or I would remain permanently banned from priestly ministry, and maybe face more serious sanctions.

"It is important to state clearly that these issues were not matters of fundamental teaching, but rather of church governance," he said.

Flannery, a popular retreat master and writer, said the congregation also had ordered him "not to have any involvement, public or private" with the Association of Catholic Priests. Flannery co-founded the association in 2010 as a forum for discussion among Irish clergy on issues affecting the Irish church and society.

"I have served the church, the Redemptorists and the people of God for two-thirds of my life. Throughout that time, I have in good conscience raised issues I believed important for the future of the Church in books and essays largely read by practicing Catholics, rather than raising them in mainstream media," Flannery said in a statement released at a news conference. "I'm hardly a major and subversive figure within the Church deserving excommunication and expulsion from the religious community within which I have lived since my teens."

The choice facing him, he said, was between deciding between Rome and his conscience.

"Submitting to these threats would be a betrayal of my ministry, my fellow priests and the Catholic people who want change," he said.

The Redemptorists in Ireland issued a strong defense of Flannery on Sunday.

"We do understand and support his efforts to listen carefully to and at times to articulate the views of people he encounters in the course of his ministry," the provincial leadership team of the Irish Redemptorists said in a statement.

They said they regretted immensely that "some structures or processes of dialogue have not yet been found in the Church which have a greater capacity to engage with challenging voices from among God's people, while respecting the key responsibility and central role of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

The Association of Catholic Priests also affirmed "in the strongest possible terms" its support for Flannery. The association said Flannery was being targeted as "part of a worldwide effort to negate the influence of independent priests' associations in Austria, USA, Germany, France, Switzerland and other places."

Also at the news conference was Fr. Helmut Schüller of the Austrian Priests' Initiative. He criticized the "lack of basic rights and respect for personal conscience" in the church.

Former Irish President Mary McAleese spoke in support of Flannery and other dissident Irish clerics Oct. 20 at the launch of her book *Quo Vadis?: Collegiality in the Code of Canon Law* at the Jesuit headquarters in Dublin. There she spoke privately to Flannery, who was making a rare public appearance.

The reform group We are Church Ireland announced a peaceful vigil outside the Vatican's Apostolic Nunciature in Dublin, planned for Jan. 27, to offer unconditional support for Flannery's right "not to be forced by an abuse of his vow of obedience to submit to the secretive demands" of the doctrinal congregation.

Flannery said, "The threats are a means, not just of terrifying me into submission, but of sending a message to any other priest expressing views at variance with those of the Roman Curia."

From the West of Ireland, Flannery was born in Attymon, County Galway, and spent time as a Redemptorist preacher in Limerick. He has a large following both as preacher and retreat master. He is a popularizer, rather than a heavyweight scholar. He holds audience attention through dialogue, especially with parents who find that the clerical abuse scandals have alienated their children from religion.

Once noted for hellfire sermons, the Redemptorists have been at the forefront of the drive for necessary church change. Flannery's 1999 book, *From the Inside: A Priest's View of the Catholic Church*, is part autobiographical and part appraisal of Irish Catholicism. It consists of short, readable pieces, highlighting inadequate sexual and

spiritual training of priests. It examines fault lines that emerged in the aftermath of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, upholding the church's ban on artificial forms of contraception.

In this book, too, Flannery criticized the institution's mishandling of clerical celibacy.

His *Fragments of Reality*, published in 2008 by Columba Press of Dublin, contains his collected writings since 1998, when he was a member of the Redemptorist Mission Team which comprised laypeople and clergy.

He saw firsthand the steady decline throughout Ireland of church attendance and of candidates for the priesthood.

He also witnessed the continued denial of any meaningful role for women in ministry. "How much longer can this policy be sustained?" he wrote. "We must be the last institution in the Western world that continues to hold such blatant discrimination against women. I don't have any doubt that there is no theological or scriptural basis for this position, but that it is purely a social and institutional construct hiding a fairly barefaced and primitive desire for male domination."

In the essay "The Ordination of Women" in *Fragments of Reality*, he revealed that he knows a few of the women who were ordained in the Roman Catholic women priests movement on a riverboat in Pittsburgh in 2006. He personally knows Irish-born Bridget Mary Meehan, who is a bishop in the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests.

[John Cooney is a Dublin-based journalist and historian.]

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