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

Former bishops' president Fiorenza talks theological diversity

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 8, 2013

With a changing of the guard upcoming for the U.S. bishops' post charged with upholding church teaching, a former head of the bishops' conference has said the incoming "theologian-in-chief" must consider various points of view.

Retired Galveston-Houston Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, who led the bishops' conference from 1998 to 2001, said the new head of the bishops' Secretariat for Doctrine has to "know that there are different theological schools of thought and that sometimes on matters which are not yet theologically defined there is freedom of discussion."

Fiorenza spoke to *NCR* Feb. 5 from his diocesan office about news that Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, who has held the doctrinal post since 2005, plans to step down [1] in August.

The secretariat carries out the work of the nine prelates who are members of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee.

During Weinandy's tenure, the bishops' committee has issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians. Those rebukes have been the subject of criticism -- including from both of the primary membership societies of U.S. theologians -- because they came without pursuing consultation or dialogue with the theologians.

Commenting on the critiques of theologians, Fiorenza said while those critiques are part of a "very, very necessary and valid role" for the committee, its members and staff "should be in constant contact with the person their investigating or the work their investigating."

Fiorenza, who stepped down as Galveston-Houston's archbishop in 2006, grabbed headlines in November when his objections [2] at the annual U.S. bishops' meeting in Baltimore to a proposed document on the struggling U.S. economy helped derail the document's passage.

Following is the full interview with Fiorenza. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

***NCR*: How did you see the role of the doctrine committee at the conference while you were there? How do you see it now?**

Fiorenza: The doctrine committee, of course, has an extremely important role in the conference because one of its main purposes is to teach the Catholic faith correctly and try to explain it to the people of the United States in a way that will be both understandable to them and persuasive to them so that they can embrace the teachings of faith with their total heart, mind and soul.

It's extremely important to have someone in charge of that committee who is extremely knowledgeable about the teachings of the church.

When I was president, we had Fr. John Strynkowski, a priest from Brooklyn, who was in charge of that

committee.

I was in charge when we appointed him, and the reason why I was happy to appoint Fr. Strynkowski was I knew him also as someone who knew the teachings of the church extremely well and that he wasn't wedded to one theological school of thought.

And I think that's important for the person in that position, that he know the teaching of the magisterium extremely well but also that he knows that there are different theological schools of thought and that sometimes on matters which are not yet theologically defined there is freedom of discussion and freedom to teach what is already defined and what is not yet already defined.

Fr. Strynkowski, in my opinion, knew theology very well and also understood there were different theological schools of thought that explain the teachings of the church.

You mention the person in the role has to both be extremely knowledgeable about the teachings of the church but also not "wedded to one theological school of thought."

When I say wedded to it, I mean he knew and understood that there were different theological schools of thought that explain the magisterial teachings from a slightly different perspective.

The doctrine committee has criticized a number of theologians in recent years, leading to its being criticized by two American theological societies. Those societies raised questions about how the committee consults theologians or how it considers their viewpoints.

Do you think this kind of work is what the committee should be doing, or is there a way to go about it more effectively? How do you see that?

You're asking now what I think about the committee or the priest in charge of the committee?

I was asking about the committee, but the priest surely influences its direction.

He's very influential, yes. I think that that's their role, to carefully study what some of the theologians are saying and doing in their writings. And to be very open to what the theologians are saying.

But at the same time, they have to offer a critical review of whether their teachings are fully in conformity with the magisterial teachings, whether their teachings might not be sufficiently clear enough so they can give the wrong opinions.

I think that's a very, very necessary and valid role for the committee, but I do think that in all those cases, they should be in constant contact with the person they're investigating or the work they're investigating. They should give them every opportunity to explain what their teaching is and how they came to the point of their theological opinion about the matter.

So their role of critiquing theologians is very necessary and valid, but they should also be in contact with the person they're investigating?

Absolutely, yes. And give them a full opportunity to explain the reasons why they have said what they have said and how their opinion is in conformity with the mind of the church.

I haven't been closely in contact with them in the past. Like you, I see what I read in the papers.

We noticed last year that the committeehad published[3] its own guidelines for how it goes about looking into theologians. It was clear that if the committee decides to go forward without discussion with those theologians, it feels it has the right to do that.

Sometimes I think they take the position that what the theologian believes and says is what he has written and what's in print. And that they may not need any further discussion with the person.

My opinion is that they should do that -- take what they've written and said very seriously -- but also, at the same time, what's the harm in also discussing it with them? Make sure they have a clear understanding of what the mind of the theologian is.

In an earlier question, you asked if I was asking about the doctrine committee or the priest in charge of it. When you were at the conference, how did you understand the balance between the bishops' committees and their staffers? How did one influence the other?

Committees depend greatly upon the staff, there's no doubt about that. But at the end of the day, it's the committee that has to make its decision, not the staff. If the staff advises, counsels, puts forward strong their opinion -- it's the committee that has to make their decision. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

I know sometimes during the years a lot of people have claimed that the staff has been too strong and the bishops have let the staff [lead] -- I disagree with that. I disagree with that. If that's the truth, then shame on the bishops. That's their staff, they have to take seriously what the staff says, but it's the bishops' committee which relies strongly on the expert advice that the staff will give to the committee. But it's the bishops' committee.

I know in the past that a lot of the statements that bishops made in regard to the Campaign for Human Development and social justice things that the bishops were just being led along by strong staff. That's not true. Bishops, I think, were quite aware of what they were saying and the reasons why they said these things.

Do you see a shift in terms of what the bishops are thinking on these things now?

No. And I think the bishops have done a good job in clarifying some of the concerns that some people had. But no matter how the bishops -- some people are just congenitally opposed to some things like the Campaign for Human Development, and nothing the bishops could do or say to clarify it are going to satisfy them.

That's a very worthwhile endeavor of the bishops' conference. It's been extremely successful. It has made great efforts in trying to alert the larger Catholic community to the problem of poverty and has been able, in some instances, to be very successful and to bring people out of poverty.

Have there been some mistakes here and there? Oh yes, there have been some. But any of the mistakes that were made cannot be blamed on the conference. All of the mistakes had to be approved by the local bishop.

Moving back to the committee on doctrine, they're now looking for a new executive director of that secretariat at the conference. When you were president, what were you looking for in people to fill those types of roles?

I would definitely look for someone who has a strong theological background, of course, with experience in writing and teaching and [who] has the experience to be able to explain things clearly.

We need someone who not only knows theology deeply, but is able to explain it in a clear and understandable way. And as I said earlier, [who] is not wedded to one particular school of theological thought, but knows different ones and how they can be compatible with the magisterial teachings and the mind of the church.

You spoke before about your experience with Fr. Strynkowski. He was a parish priest before he joined the conference and went back to being a pastor after leaving. How do you think pastoral experience fits into this?

Oh, it's a very, very important ingredient. It's a very important ingredient. I wouldn't make it a *sine qua non*, but it's very important.

But I don't think Cardinal [Joseph] Ratzinger had any pastoral experience, and he turned out to be a pretty good theologian.

From where you're sitting, what focus should be on the committee's plate with the new person coming in?

I hesitate to say because I don't know what the present doctrine committee has as their focus, the things that they're maybe ready to consider. I'm just not aware of that.

Before I let you go, I want to ask about one other thing. I'm a journalist, so I have to ask: What are you thinking about what's happening in Los Angeles with Cardinal Roger Mahony and Archbishop Jose Gomez?

I know both of them very well. Archbishop Gomez spent most of his priestly life here in Houston, so I knew him very well. And I've known Cardinal Mahony since before I was a bishop.

I don't know. The main thing I can say, I guess, is it's sad. Hopefully, they will be able to very soon give each other a sign of peace. I just think it is unfortunate these things couldn't have been worked out privately before it got public.

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Source URL (retrieved on *03/10/2014 - 09:08*): http://ncronline.org/news/former-bishops-president-fiorenza-talks-theological-diversity

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