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Theologians: Meeting with bishops helpful despite selection process

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 24, 2013

While some people attending a recent three-day meeting between U.S. bishops and a group of younger theologians criticized the event as too closed, they also said it quickly developed into a collegial atmosphere of dialogue.

Overall, said one theologian who attended, the bishops at the meeting gave a sense of "strong encouragement" for greater conversation between the prelates and academics.

The bishops "weren't telling us to listen to them," said Gregory Hillis, an assistant professor of theology at Bellarmine University in Kentucky. "It was the sense that they also were encouraging themselves to listen more."

Hillis and the other theologians met Sept. 12-14 with 14 bishops at the Blessed John Paul II Shrine in Washington. The meeting, which focused on the interplay of the roles of catechesis and theology, was hosted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Doctrine Committee and by the Knights of Columbus.

It was part of a multiyear effort on the part of the bishops to encourage dialogue with theologians. Hillis and other theologians who spoke to *NCR* afterward praised the bishops for hosting the event and for seeming open to a variety of ideas during its talks and discussion sessions.

Even so, they said the fact that the even was open only to academics selected [1] by the bishops was a concern.

"I really appreciated that it was an opportunity for listening exchange," said Mara Brecht, an associate professor of religious studies at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin. "But the question became for me, Whose voices are being exchanged here?"

Brecht, who focuses her work on religious pluralism and philosophies of religion, said the process for selection of attendees meant "a lot of the people who went were not necessarily people who do not find themselves to necessarily be in a relationship of tension with bishops, which I think is not representative of Catholic theologians more broadly."

But she did say that like Hillis, she found the event "extremely gratifying" because of the opportunity for the younger academics to engage the bishops in discussion.

"They took time to listen to the theologians who were there," Brecht said. "In that sense, I felt very encouraged by the meeting."

Among bishops attending the event were Archbishop John Nienstedt of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the current chair of the bishops' Doctrine Committee, and Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who headed that committee from 2009 to 2012.

The focus on the intersection of catechesis and theology represents a dynamic that sometimes causes tension

between bishops and theologians. At question is whether the academics, who teach college-level courses and publish in scholarly journals, should be primarily responsible for teaching the basics of the Catholic faith.

The bishops' doctrine committee has issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians since 2005. In several of those criticisms, it said the theologian in question could have caused some confusion over the church's official teachings.

Hillis, a native Canadian who focuses on historical theology, said "some pretty difficult questions" were asked of the bishops. Several of the theologians, he said, were interested in knowing "how willing the bishops were to have theologians continue to ask difficult questions about some aspects of church teaching."

"I got the sense that was just understood to be a given, that that was something that theologians can and should do," he said.

Brecht and other theologians said they applied to attend the meeting after their university or college presidents were invited to solicit theologians for the event. Hillis said it seemed that the theologian attendees at the meeting may have been picked from those who applied first.

"My sense is that the first 50 people who applied got in," he said. "If they had looked over anything I had written ... they wouldn't have thought that they were getting somebody who was going to fawn over them."

Thomas Bushlack, an assistant professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, wrote in an email that he too has "publicly disagreed with some of the positions of my local bishop and my application was nevertheless accepted."

At the event, he wrote, "there were conflicting and challenging viewpoints voiced by both theologians and bishops, but this is precisely how deeper understanding is cultivated."

"Personally, I was able to express my concerns over how many political issues are (mis)handled publicly by the bishops, as well as my reservations about the possibility of academic theologians being able to compensate for poor catechesis in other areas of church life," he wrote in his email. "I believe that these comments were respectfully received and heard in a way that they could not have been through the usual media channels."

Each of the theologians *NCR* contacted gave particular praise to an address given to the assembly by Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas.

Flores, who made his talk available on his personal blog [2] after the meeting, told the theologians that the work of prelates and academics was "prone to be too cerebral."

Quoting at times from frequently cited church writers like sixth-century Pope Gregory the Great and second-century Saint Irenaeus as well as passages from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, he said: "People do need to get out more."

"If we want to learn what Jesus means when he says we have to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, it is necessary that we invite people to the experience of losing and finding," Flores said.

Brecht said Flores' approach was "exactly the kind of approach I take in my classes, using the literary imagination or engaging with pop culture to get students to think theologically or to see unfamiliar things in familiar ways."

Bushlack said after attending the conference, he is "cautiously hopeful that these recent efforts on the part of the bishops could be a stepping stone to greater dialogue in the future."

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