

Theologian defends book in letter to bishops' doctrine committee

WASHINGTON - Fordham University systematic theology professor Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson defended her 2007 book that recently came under harsh criticism from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, restating concerns that her work was "thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented" by the committee.

Her vigorous defense of "Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God" came in a 38-page letter June 1 to committee members, reported National Catholic Reporter. The newspaper said it received a copy of her correspondence from a source not affiliated with the university.

Capuchin Franciscan Father Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Catholic News Service June 8 the doctrine committee was expected to discuss Sister Elizabeth's response when the bishops meet June 15-17 near Seattle in Bellevue, Wash.

The book, which has become a popular choice of faculty teaching introductory theology classes on college campuses, was singled out by the nine members of the doctrine committee for containing "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors" related to the Catholic faith in a March 30 statement.

The committee, chaired by Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, said the book failed to take the faith of the Catholic Church as its starting point and chose to use standards from outside the faith to "criticize and to revise in a radical fashion the conception of God revealed in Scripture and taught by the magisterium."

In response, Sister Elizabeth, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, charged that the doctrine committee's statement erred in deciding that her book did not start with the faith of the church. She also said the committee incorrectly interpreted her critique of the theological position known as modern theism as a criticism of the Catholic faith and misconstrued her position on religious language about understanding God.

“Given these initial misreadings, what follows (in the statement) was almost bound to miss the mark,” Sister Elizabeth wrote. “Ideas are taken out of context and twisted to mean what they patently do not mean. Sentences are run to a conclusion far from what I think or the text says. False dilemmas are composed. Numerous omissions, distortions and outright misstatements of fact riddle the reading.

“As a work of theology, ‘Quest for the Living God’ was thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented in the committee’s statement. As a result, the statement’s judgment that Quest does not cohere with Catholic teaching is less than compelling. It hangs in the air, untethered by the text of the book itself,” the letter said.

In her letter, Sister Elizabeth said her book “is a work of theology ... not a catechism, nor a compendium on doctrine.”

“It represents areas of Christian life and study where the mystery of the living God is being glimpsed anew in contemporary situations,” she explained.

She explained that her book does not deny implicitly or explicitly any church doctrine derived from Scripture and creed, but that it represents “how contemporary believers are seeking to express the ancient wisdom with new relevance.”

Well-known and respected for her work, Sister Elizabeth also questioned the committee’s review process, expressing concern that she was not contacted to discuss the book prior to release of the bishops’ criticism.

“To use a judicial metaphor: the fact that ‘Quest for the Living God’ was brought up on charges by person or persons unknown, put on a yearlong trial and found guilty before I was ever informed adds to the problematic aspect of the statement’s appearance,” she wrote. “In my view, it would have been better to have this dialogue prior to the release of the statement. Then, if the Committee on Doctrine still wished to make a statement, it would at least be based on an accurate reading of what the book actually says.

“Simple human courtesy would indicate that springing such a public critique without warning is neither a generous nor respectful way to treat an adult,” she said.

Sister Elizabeth explained that had it not been for New York Archbishop Timothy M.

Dolan, she would have learned about the statement only after it was reported in the media.

The detailed letter addresses the committee's concerns, explaining how each theological premise in the book was developed with citations from Scripture, papal statements and church documents.

Sister Elizabeth also said that her book was not intended to be used as a college text but for "a broad audience of thinking, seeking, committed, teaching, preaching adults as nourishment for their own mature faith."

"The fact that it is being use in whole or part in college and university courses indicates a professional judgment that young adults could benefit from critical engagement with theological conversations actually taking place in the church today," she wrote.