

Catholic bishops censure feminist theologian's book

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned a book by Sister Elizabeth Johnson, a prominent feminist theologian, charging that her attempts to forge new understandings of God depart from traditional Catholic theology.

The bishops' Committee on Doctrine on Wednesday (March 30) said Johnson's 2007 book, "Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God," could be dangerous for the "broad audience" it seeks to reach.

The book came under scrutiny after several bishops relayed concerns about its contents.

The bishops said the book's "basic problem" is that it does not "take the faith of the church as its starting point. Instead, the author employs standards from outside the faith to criticize and to revise in a radical fashion the conception of God" as taught by the church.

As a result, the book "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points" including the names of God and the Trinity, the bishops said.

Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who chairs the doctrine committee,

expressed concern that Johnson's book would be used as a textbook and students "may be led to assume that its content is authentic Catholic teaching" and could thus endanger readers' "spiritual welfare."

Last year, the bishops blasted two professors at Creighton University for a "radical departure" from church teaching in their book on sexuality. In 2007, the bishops rebuked a Georgetown University theologian for his book on the uniqueness of Christianity.

Johnson, a theologian at Fordham University and former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, expressed two concerns of her own in a statement released Wednesday.

Johnson said that she was not invited to discuss her book with bishops, and that the committee misinterpreted her views.

Wuerl said Johnson should have sought an imprimatur -- or a bishop's stamp of approval -- to ensure the book did not run afoul of church teaching.

Johnson appeared unbowed by the criticism from the bishops.

"The task of theology, classically defined as `faith seeking understanding,' calls for theologians to wrestle with mystery," she said. "The issues are always complex, especially on frontiers where the church's living tradition is growing."