

Bishops defend criticism of woman theologian

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

Under fire for criticizing a popular theologian, the U.S. Catholic bishops said they must occasionally assume the role of referee and rule wayward thinkers out of bounds.

"Once ideas are written and published by a theologian, they must stand on their own," Cardinal Donald Wuerl, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on doctrine, said in a statement. "It is the bishops who are entrusted with the office of referee, who must call the play."

Early in April, Wuerl's committee criticized a book by Elizabeth Johnson that is widely used in Catholic universities and colleges. The book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, criticizes and revises traditional church teaching, the bishops said.

Public back-and-forth debates between the bishops and theologians, while rare, have increased in recent years, as the bishops seek to guide a large and sometimes unwieldy church.

Johnson has said the bishops misrepresented her work, a charge echoed by the Catholic Theological Society of America, which Johnson once served as president. The CTSA also said the bishops' criticism of Johnson "seems to reflect a very narrow understanding of the theological task."

Wuerl, in his 14-page response, said the CTSA seems to "misread" the legitimate and apostolic role of bishops. "It is the responsibility of the bishop to make the call and to declare, if necessary, certain notions out of

bounds, the bounds of Christian revelation," Wuerl said. —RNS