

Cardinal's claim disputed by Catholic theologian

by [David Gibson](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

An unusual public dispute is brewing between Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl and a feminist theologian who essentially accused Wuerl of lying about the hierarchy's review of her work.

The feud between Sister Elizabeth Johnson and the doctrine committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—which Wuerl heads—escalated in late October following the committee's renewed criticism of Johnson's landmark book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*.

Wuerl charged on October 29 that Johnson failed to respond to three offers to meet with him to discuss the dispute. Johnson responded by saying she was "aghast" at how Wuerl depicted the deteriorating relationship and said Wuerl should retract the statement "for the sake of [his] own reputation for truth-telling, and for the good of the church."

A spokeswoman for the USCCB, which has handled the communications for Wuerl and the doctrine committee, said the cardinal would have no further statement. The correspondence between Wuerl and Johnson was posted shortly thereafter on the blog of *Commonweal* magazine, a leading liberal Catholic publication.

The rare public exchange marks the latest chapter in a months-long clash that has worsened already tense relations between the Catholic bishops and theologians.

The saga began last March when Wuerl's nine-member doctrine committee released a sweeping critique of Johnson's book. The condemnation stunned theologians and Johnson, a professor of systematic theology at Fordham University in New York, in part because the book had been so well received since its publication in 2007 and also because Johnson was given no notice about the investigation.

The hierarchy's own guidelines call for open dialogue with theologians whose work may be suspect before pronouncements are issued. But USCCB officials said in March that the popularity of Johnson's book demanded immediate action and that the yearlong review of her work had to be conducted in secret.

Johnson expressed dismay at the negative verdict on her work and asked to meet with the committee. In June she sent the panel a 38-page defense of her work.

On October 28, the doctrine committee released a statement reiterating their disapproval of the book, which it said did not pay sufficient heed to earlier Catholic traditions on how to conceptualize God. The bishops charge that the book also uses "ambiguous" terms that could be open to misinterpretation, such as female images for the divine.

In response, Johnson expressed "sadness" and "disappointment" and again said she felt the bishops misunderstood her work and that she has always espoused "the church's faith about God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit." Johnson also lamented that the doctrinal committee did not take up her offer to meet to discuss their differences.

That led Wuerl to issue an unusual statement on October 29, posted at the USCCB website, saying the cardinal had offered to meet with Johnson three times, in correspondence sent July 22 and October 11 and in a telephone call and follow-up email on October 26. "Sister Johnson did not respond to any of the offers," Wuerl said.

But the exchanges posted at *Commonweal* quotes Johnson writing to Wuerl July 14 to say: "I assure you explicitly of my willingness to meet face-to-face to clarify these matters, and in fact would like to do so, should you deem that helpful."

Wuerl replied on July 22, saying that the committee would review her response. "The next meeting of the committee is set for September and as soon as possible following the meeting I will get word to you," Wuerl wrote Johnson, adding: "I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you."

The next time Wuerl contacted Johnson was in a letter dated October 11, to inform her that the committee had concluded its response, set for release on October 28. Wuerl added, "I renew my offer to meet with you if you so desire."

Johnson is on sabbatical this fall and did not receive the letter. On October 25—with the committee's response set to be published—Wuerl's secretary e-mailed Johnson. She responded the next day, but the doctrine committee said it was too late to change the bishops' statement or arrange a meeting.

After Wuerl posted his statement saying that Johnson failed to respond and that he was renewing his offer to meet with her himself, Johnson fired back. "I am aghast at the accusation you make in the USCCB website post that I have not responded to any of the offers to meet," Johnson wrote to Wuerl in an e-mail.

"I never received an offer to meet at a definite time or with a protocol or agenda that would ensure serious discussion of the issues in my book," Johnson wrote. "If I had, I would have accepted immediately. In addition, each offer was vague about time, indicating that a meeting would take place after the committee's deliberations were over." —RNS