

Panel says bishops have the last word on Catholic theology

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The task of giving the "authentic interpretation" of the Catholic faith ultimately belongs to bishops, not theologians, a Vatican panel said Thursday (March 8).

A report written by an advisory group of theologians that answers to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said defining Catholic teaching falls chiefly to the "college of bishops headed by the pope."

The report, "Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria," was prepared by the International Theological Commission but is not considered part of the church's official teaching. Nonetheless, its publication was specifically approved by the Vatican's doctrinal chief, Cardinal William J. Levada.

It is aimed at defining the principles of theological research in the Catholic Church and at exploring the limits of theologians' freedom. The issues raised by the document have recently come into the spotlight after the controversial condemnation of feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson by the U.S. bishops.

"Theology Today" clearly states that "'dissent' towards the magisterium has no place in Catholic theology," but stresses that "investigation and questioning" are "justified and even necessary."

Bishops and theologians have "distinct callings, and must respect one another's particular competence," the panel said. But in the end, the "'authentic' interpretation of the faith" is a prerogative of church authorities, namely the bishops, and theologians cannot "presume to

substitute the teaching office of the church's pastors."

According to the document, theologians play a role in helping church authorities understand and accept historical developments. In the past, the report said the church has been "overly cautious" toward movements such as the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, women's emancipation and ecology.