Theologians struggle to tie together roles in church, academia
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Duquesne University Professor George Worgul remembers well a conversation he had with Cardinal Donald Wuerl in 1989.

The professor had just been appointed chair of the theology department at Pittsburgh's largest Catholic university. Then-Bishop Wuerl had taken the reins of the diocese the year before. Worgul says the bishop reached out to talk about how bishops and theologians can work together.

Recalling the meeting as "very positive," Worgul says he walked away impressed with how the bishop appreciated the "complexity of the role of the theologian."

The professor remembers in particular one thing the bishop said.

"I understand that you have a doctoral program and you have to push the edges and ask the questions. I understand that and respect that," Worgul recalled Wuerl telling him.

Although Wuerl did not respond to NCR's request for comment, that brief conversation, remembered anecdotally 22 years later, seems to provide some context for the ongoing discussion of the role of the theologian in the church.

Last March, Wuerl, now the archbishop of Washington and head of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee, issued a condemnation of St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's book Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God, saying it contains "misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors" and "does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points."

That condemnation touched off a firestorm of debate between the bishops' committee and theologians, who wondered why the bishops didn't first dialogue with Johnson about her book, as a 1983 document outlining the relationship between bishops and theologians suggests.

But among other questions raised by theologians in the wake of the bishops' condemnation is what exactly it means for the role of theology at the university level, where theologians are expected to "push the edges and ask the questions" in ways historians or philosophers would.

In a conversation in October, one theologian rang a warning bell about his profession, wondering how it could continue in the light of the bishops' latest move.

"If the bishops continue along this path of censuring or making statements without engaging in dialogue with the theologians," Terrence Tilley said, "theology may be laughed out of the university as mere propaganda."
Saying faculty in other academic disciplines have expressed concerns to him about "the worth of doing theology with academic rigor," Tilley, theology department chair at New York's Fordham University, where Johnson is a professor, wondered about the endgame of hierarchical condemnations.

"The net result of the attempts to 'correct' theologians is not merely to increase book sales," Tilley said, "but also to expose faithful theologians to derision from those who are not especially respectful of ecclesial theology or the church as an institution."

NCR conversations in early November with several current and former theology and religious studies department chairs found them each raising similar questions.

While each differed regarding how exactly the bishops' condemnation of Johnson would affect the continuation of theology at the university level, all openly wondered how the theologian -- who may "push the edges" for the church by asking questions -- fits at the university, where asking questions is a part of the job description.

For many theologians, the key to the debate about theology's role in the church is whether the discipline is seen as independent of catechesis, as something that both provides an education in the basics of the Christian life and goes beyond the lines of the catechism.

Professor Susan Ross, theology department chair at Loyola University Chicago, put it simply.

"The theologian's task," she wrote in an email, "while sometimes involving some kinds of catechesis, is more properly the task of asking questions about the tradition, pushing forward new ways of theological expression … and pointing out ways of understanding what Catholics/Christians believe."

Yet, others say, the idea of theologian as master catechist is also prominent.

"In some quarters of the church," said John Thiel, a professor of religious studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut who is also a former chair of the department there, the role of theology is seen as "simply repeating the uncontroversial and recognized heritage of the ancient tradition."

"That's one legitimate way of doing theology," said Thiel, who is president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. "But it's not the only way of doing theology."

Instead, he said, "there is a pluralism in ways to do theology in the church today and this pluralism is unprecedented in theology's earlier history."

"The reason that it's unprecedented is that we live in cultures that are much more pluralistic in our thoroughly globalized world, so we appreciate the different ways of approaching and naming reality," Thiel said. "Theology can develop an appreciation for all those different approaches, too, and has."

What keeps theology's new approaches to reality at the academic level, said one department chair, is its ability to pursue all the questions, not just those the bishops have specified as worthy of consideration.
Just like any other academic discipline, said Gary Macy, chair of the religious studies department at Santa Clara University in California, theology has to "put all the questions on the table."

Using his own specialty of historical theology to explain the requirements of academic rigor, Macy gave the example of a historian examining the provenance of a document signed in the 14th century.

That historian, Macy said, would have to look into what evidence there is to prove the document's authenticity, what was supposed to have happened during the signing, and, ultimately, what the signing matters to current generations.

"To be an academic, you have to ask all the questions and answer them consistently," Macy said. "It's quite rigorous. Academics don't take questions off the table. We just don't. You don't do that."

Moreover, he said, when bishops expect theologians to hold certain questions back -- for example, whether women can be ordained -- it just makes it more difficult for theologians to explain church teaching to their students.

"It's a Catch-22," he said. "We're told: 'Don't talk about this, but explain it.' That's very difficult, if not impossible, to do.

"Theologians are also supposed to explain the church teaching," Macy said. "But if we can't talk about it, we can't explain it. And it's not going to work to say my explanation is 'I don't need an explanation.' "

While some might see the need to ask questions as opposed to staying faithful to the dictates of the hierarchy, Thiel said theologians can tie together the two dynamics by thinking of them as "liberating responsibilities."

The key to tying together the active pursuit of questions with fidelity to the church, Thiel said, lies in the fact that theologians "have a responsibility to sources of authority that other disciplines don't have," including to the "word of God, the tradition and the magisterium."

"Although I think there are confining understandings of how theologians are responsible to these authorities, I don't see how that responsibility to God or to the workings of the Holy Spirit can be confining," Thiel said. "They're liberating responsibilities."

Yet, at the same time, Macy said, theologians have to be careful not to be seen as always reaching the same conclusions as the bishops. Otherwise, he said, people might say theologians are not "really part of an academic discipline because they're subject to Rome, and because they have to reach the conclusions that Rome already has."

Complicating the theologian's role at the university, said Worgul, who is now in his second stint as theology department chair at Duquesne University after a break in the 1990s, are changes in the world and church.
Along with those changes, he said, are evolutions in how theology itself is practiced. While the majority of theologians are now lay, decades ago most were members of religious communities, and those communities served as their "reference points."

Those reference points are changing more and more. Citing the expanding diversity of students at Catholic colleges, where students of other faiths are commonly found, the professor said theologians are dealing with "questions that ... sometimes don't resemble questions that we're asked before."

Among those questions, he said, are ones concerning how Catholic beliefs relate to those of other faiths. With a host of diverse students in their classes, he said, theologians, unlike bishops, "actually inhabit the world" of those "who are asking the deepest questions" about Christianity.

"In light of these changes," Worgul said, "reality shifts a bit."

Part of the irony of the bishops' moves against theologians, Macy said, is that they sometimes scare the scholars who have the best understanding of the changing dynamics of the world: younger theologians.

Condemnations like the one issued against Johnson, he said, affect younger theologians the most, as they become concerned they might not get tenured or could get their schools in trouble should they "push too far."

Also a concern, he said, is that theologians might start "self-policing."

"People might start ... asking, 'Do I really want to say this?' " Macy said. " 'I could get my university in trouble with the bishop and that could be a problem for my career.'"

And at colleges that have good relationships with their bishops, Macy said theologians might conversely withhold from publishing because they "don't want to get their bishop in trouble."

Both Macy and Worgul expressed concern that continued standoffs between bishops and professors could lead to disinterest in the study of theology.

Worgul said bishops and theologians need to find ways to work better together, or they risk losing pertinence when contrasted with the challenges facing people in the modern world.

"Both theologians and bishops face the same challenge that's coming," Worgul said. "That's the challenge of being declared irrelevant, of people saying, 'What you're saying is interesting, but we don't know who you're talking to.'"

In today's society, he said, both groups "have to work together to try and make sure that we're listening to the questions ... people today are asking."

Bishops and theologians, he said, have to "work together to show that the Gospel has some positive response to offer."