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Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, delivers remarks at St. Sophia Ukrainian Catholic Church in The Colony, Texas, March 6, 2022, during a prayer service for peace in Ukraine. (CNS photo/Juan Guajardo, North Texas Catholic)

by OSV News

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The Holy See has declared Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth to be "pontifical commissary" of the Monastery of Saint Joseph of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, according to a decree from the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life dated May 31, 2023 and published on the website of the Diocese of Fort Worth. Olson "will assume his office upon communication" of the decree, it said.

This role, the decree says, gives Olson "full governing powers" over the community, as well as "the faculty to appoint, if necessary, the nuns to assume the roles of overseer of the community members, legal representative, treasurer, etc." The decree states that the dicastery made its declaration "after careful consideration of the particular situation" regarding the nuns in Arlington, Texas.

The dicastery also "sanates all the administrative and legal acts already performed by the same bishops," the decree says. Sanation is a canonical term meaning that such acts have been made valid retroactively.

In an accompanying statement, the diocese noted that with this decree the Holy See "recognized and acknowledged that Bishop Olson has been, and continues to be, entrusted with full governing responsibility for the monastery."

The statement said the decree "is in response to the challenge to Bishop Olson’s authority to conduct an investigation into the admitted-to violations of the sixth commandment of the Decalogue and the vow of chastity by the Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes (Gerlach) of Jesus Crucified, O.C.D., Prioress of the Monastery in Arlington, Texas."

It asks for prayers for the sisters and Olson.

The decree was made after the superior of the discalced Carmelite community sued the bishop and the Diocese of Fort Worth following the bishop's launch of an investigation into allegations against that superior.

Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes of Jesus Crucified Gerlach and Subprioress Sr. Francis Therese Sharp, along with their cloistered religious community at the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas, filed the lawsuit in Tarrant County district court May 3 accusing Olson of overstepping his ecclesiastical authority by initiating the investigation. The nuns say they answer directly to the

pope.

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A May 16 statement issued from the Diocese of Fort Worth said that Olson received a report in April that Gerlach "committed sins against the Sixth Commandment and violated her vow of chastity with a priest from outside the Diocese of Fort Worth." It said that the priest's superiors have been notified.

According to the statement, the diocese began an ecclesiastical investigation into the allegation April 24 at the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity, and Gerlach responded with civil litigation.

In an affidavit May 10, Gerlach stated that the monastery was an "institution of pontifical right" that depends "immediately and exclusively on the Pope regarding matters of internal governance and discipline.

"We are and have never been under the control of the Bishop of the local Diocese: we answer directly to the Pope," she said.

This story appears in the **Arlington Carmelites in controversy** feature series. View the full series.