News



Mother Superior Teresa Agnes Gerlach, front, and another member of the Order of Discalced Carmelite in Arlington, Texas, are pictured in this undated photo featured in a CBS News Texas story June 8. Fort Worth Bishop Michael Owens has accused Gerlach of breaking her vow of chastity with an unnamed priest outside the diocese and removed her from the order. Gerlach has denied the allegation and said the bishop does not have the authority to take such action. (GSR screenshot/CBS News Texas)

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In a packed Tarrant County courtroom on June 27, the Catholic Diocese's attorney played an audio recording of a nun explaining to the bishop her relationship with a priest.

As part of their evidence, the diocese's legal team played the recording documenting the conversation between Bishop Michael Olson and the Rev. Mother Superior Teresa Agnes Gerlach. During their conversation, Gerlach named Bernard Murray, a priest from the Transalpine Redemptorist in Montana. Olson testified that Sr. Francis Therese told him that the relationship between Gerlach and Murray involved "sexting."

What's next?

67th District Judge Don Cosby told the court that he wants to go back and look at the evidence and arguments made at the hearing on June 27 before making any decisions. Cosby told the court that he plans to have a decision out next week.

The lawsuit, filed by Gerlach and Therese from the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, claims Olson invaded the nuns' privacy and damaged their reputation within the monastery.

In the recording that was played in court, Gerlach also can be heard saying that she had a history of experiencing seizures and that she was not in her right mind.

"Bishop, at the time I was having seizures and in a difficult position, and I think my brain got very messed up," Gerlach said in the recording when addressing Olson.

Fr. Jonathan Wallis from the Catholic diocese testified to the court that Gerlach disclosed to him on Dec. 22, 2022, that she had broken her chastity vow with a priest. Wallis told the court that he didn't ask Gerlach to specify what she meant by that.

What's at stake?

The Rev. Mother Superior Teresa Agnes Gerlach and Sister Francis Therese are seeking $1 million in monetary relief from the bishop's allegations and approach in handling the investigation. While the judge is still deciding if Tarrant County has jurisdiction over the lawsuit, a canonical investigation on Gerlach is pending in Rome.

Gerlach has 30 days to appeal the bishop’s decision to dismiss her to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of the Apostolic Life, which is a group within the Vatican that oversees matters relating to religious orders.

After hearing nearly six hours of testimony on Tuesday, 67th District Court Judge Don Cosby said he would take the matter under advisement and rule next week. At issue is whether the county has jurisdiction over a lawsuit filed by two Discalced Carmelite nuns in Arlington against Olson and the Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth.

"This is a difficult, emotional matter, and I hope that everyone respects that," the judge said at the conclusion of the hearing.

The suit comes after Olson dismissed Gerlach from the Order of Discalced Carmelites upon conclusion of an investigation in April, alleging that she was guilty of breaking her chastity vow, according to a June 1 decree of dismissal from the Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth.

Matthew Bobo, the attorney representing the nuns on civil matters, left the courtroom without commenting on the case. During the hearing, Bobo argued that Olson "forced the Rev. Mother to turn over her computer, iPad and cellular phone to him personally," which he argued was an invasion of privacy and stole their personal and financial property. Bobo told the court that property rights are civil matters, not ecclesiastical.

The Fort Worth diocese argued that the issues between the bishop and the nuns should stay within the Catholic church.

Cosby concluded the hearing by saying he would review the evidence and read the arguments again before making a decision.

Related: Allegations of adultery and abuse of power embroil Texas bishop, Carmelite monastery in complex scandal

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