News





Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes of Jesus Crucified Gerlach (left), a longtime member of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, and Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas (OSV News/Courtesy of Matthew Bobo/Bob Roller)

Maria Wiering

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

July 3, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A Texas judge dismissed a lawsuit filed by cloistered Carmelite nuns against Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth June 30, the same day local police announced they had closed their separate investigation into the dispute without recommending criminal charges against any individual involved.

Texas District Court Judge Don Cosby's decision follows a June 27 hearing in Tarrant County to determine whether a complaint filed in early May by the prioress and fellow nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington against Olson and the Fort Worth Diocese had civil merit, or was solely a matter for church courts.

The civil case involved questions over whether the bishop overstepped his authority, unlawfully took monastery property and defamed the prioress, Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach of Jesus Crucified, whom he had investigated in April for breaking chastity vows via "video chat" over the phone with a priest.

"We are grateful for Judge Cosby's ruling today in dismissing the nuns' lawsuit," Olson said in a June 30 statement provided to OSV News. "The decision vindicates our steadfast belief that this is a private Church matter that does not belong in the courts."

The statement indicated the matter will now "continue to proceed through an established canonical process," and asked the faithful for their prayers for all parties involved.

"We are shocked, extremely disappointed and respectfully disagree with Judge Cosby's decision," Matthew Bobo, an attorney representing Gerlach and the monastery sisters, said in a June 30 statement to OSV News, indicating they plan to appeal the ruling.

Bobo alleged the decision indicated the church could "trounce private citizens' constitutionally-protected civil liberties ... without any practical justification whatsoever."

Advertisement

"And not only that, but that a Catholic bishop may publicly defame a Catholic to the media multiple times, and Catholic priests may freely manifest Catholics' alleged sins to the entire world without any repercussion, either from the Vatican or the civil justice system," he said.

In a June 30 statement to OSV News, the Arlington Police Department announced it had concluded investigations into all parties involved in the dispute. Earlier in June, the police received a criminal complaint filed by "a local law firm" over Olson's actions, and had also received information from the diocese of potentially illegal cannabis use at the monastery.

"Following a thorough and extensive review by APD detectives, and in consultation with the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office, we have determined probable cause does not exist to file criminal charges against any of the individuals involved," the Arlington Police Department said. "The case is now considered closed."

The June 27 hearing in Texas' 67th District Court shed some light on a sometimes confounding situation that has captured national attention since Gerlach, subprioress Sr. Francis Therese Sharp, and the other nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity filed the lawsuit May 3 against the bishop and diocese.

Gerlach, 43, later added a defamation claim, after the diocese released statements revealing the nun was being investigated for "admitted-to violations of the sixth commandment of the Decalogue and the vow of chastity." Bobo maintained the mother superior did not admit to violating her chastity vow.

On May 31, the Vatican granted Olson governance authority over the sisters. The following day, the bishop issued a decree finding Gerlach guilty of violating her chastity vows and dismissing her from the Carmelite order.

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

A 32-minute recording played in a Fort Worth, Texas, courtroom June 27 appeared to include Gerlach's confession of sexual misconduct via a mobile phone with a priest later revealed to be Fr. Philip Johnson from the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina. She called him "Father Bernard Marie," the religious name Johnson took while living at a Transalpine Redemptorist monastery in Forsyth, Montana.

The recording was made during an April 24 conversation between the bishop and Gerlach, in which he confronted her about an allegation she had broken her chastity vows with a priest and announced an investigation into the matter. In their conversation, Gerlach acknowledges she had engaged in unspecified, inappropriate sexual conduct with a priest by "video chat" via a phone on two occasions. She said the misconduct did not occur in person.

In a statement, the Raleigh Diocese confirmed to OSV News the priest had been granted leave from the diocese since 2020, joined the Transalpine Redemptorist Monastery in Montana in 2022, and had only just returned after resigning from the community, "where he served under the chosen name of Fr. Bernard Marie."

In court documents, Gerlach has described herself as "in extremely poor physical health." In the recorded conversation, she told Olson that she had experienced seizures around the time of the phone conversations with alleged sexual misconduct, which the nun described as "a horrible, horrible mistake."

"I was in a very difficult position, and I think my brain just got really messed up," she said.

Ordained for the Raleigh Diocese in 2017, Johnson received national attention in 2014 as a 30-year-old seminarian reported to have inoperable, terminal brain cancer, who had written an open letter to Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old California woman with terminal brain cancer shortly before she went through a highly publicized physician-assisted suicide.

The Transalpine Redemptorists posted a June 27 statement confirming the priest was at their Montana house for a few months with his bishop's permission as a novice, but was not formally a member of the religious order and was not in public ministry. He resigned as a novice May 1 and returned to his diocese, the statement said.

The Raleigh Diocese said in a June 28 statement that the priest is not currently exercising public ministry, and that Bishop Luis Zarama has restricted his priestly faculties "as a precautionary measure until more clarity regarding his status can be ascertained." The priest has not publicly acknowledged the alleged sexual impropriety.

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