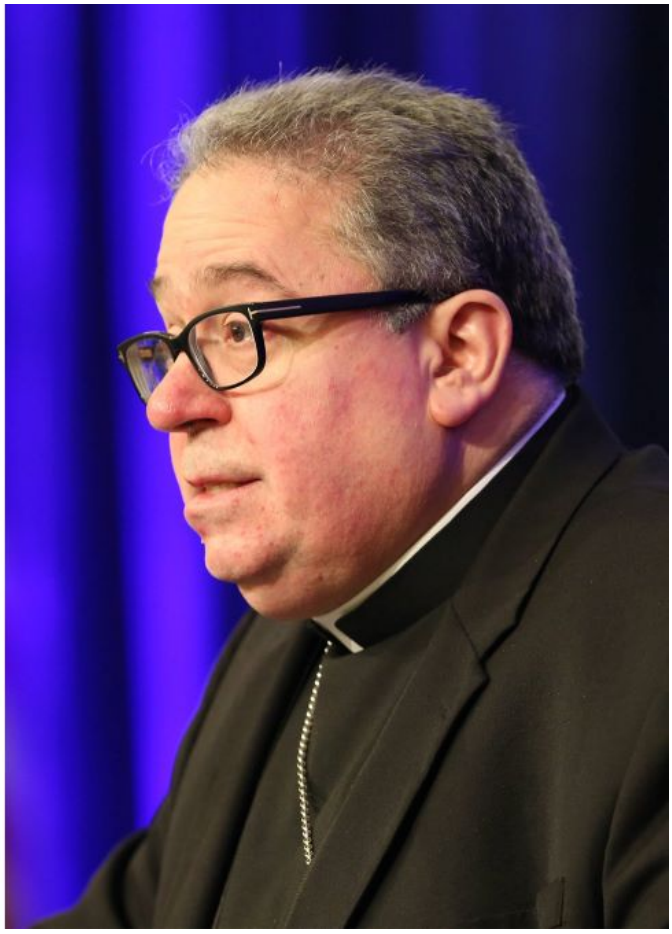
News





Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes of Jesus Crucified Gerlach, a longtime member of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, and Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, are pictured in a combination photo. (OSV News/Courtesy of Matthew Bobo; CNS file/Bob Roller)



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The nuns at a monastery in Texas taken over by the local bishop this spring will not appeal the dismissal of their civil lawsuit so they can pursue a canonical appeal at the Vatican.

Attorney Matthew Bobo issued a statement July 31 saying Arlington Carmelites at the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity were informed by church officials in Rome that the "multiple appeals and recourses that have been filed with the dicastery" will not be considered until any civil litigation is complete.

The Discalced Carmelite Nuns, Mother Superior Sr. Teresa Agnes Gerlach, and Sr. Francis Therese Sharp, in a lawsuit filed May 3 alleged that Fort Worth Bishop Michael Olson and the diocese violated their privacy, took electronic devices and defamed Gerlach by publicly stating she "committed sins against the Sixth Commandment and violated her vow of chastity." They demanded $1 million in damages. Sharp is on the monastery's leadership council and Gerlach's personal caregiver to help with her multiple health issues.

Olson was later appointed pontifical commissary for the congregation — essentially making him the major superior of the order — and he announced Gerlach had been found guilty and dismissed her from the Carmelite order.

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The lawsuit was dismissed June 30 when the county court ruled the allegations were church matters, not civil law issues. Bobo vowed to appeal, saying in a statement to OSV News, "We are shocked, extremely disappointed and respectfully disagree," because the dismissal means "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."

Also on June 30, the Arlington Police Department announced both of its criminal investigations were closed and no charges would be filed against either party. The nuns had asked the police to investigate Olson’s actions at the monastery; the diocese asked the police to investigate allegations of illegal cannabis use there.

Now, the appeal of their lawsuit's dismissal is off the table while the appeals to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life play out.

"Based on this latest correspondence from the Vatican, the nuns have decided to end the civil litigation and not appeal the jurisdictional decision made by the civil court," Bobo said in an emailed statement. Since the deadline to file an appeal in Texas courts is generally 30 to 90 days after a judgment, and any action taken by Rome could take months or years, the option of appealing the dismissal in the future is essentially gone.

"The nuns place their hopes and prayers on a just and fair review of the case by the Vatican to ensure that acts taken by Bishop Olson will be reversed and they will be completely exonerated, thereby allowing them to return to their prayerful contemplative life without further unlawful interference by Bishop Olson," Bobo's statement said. "The nuns also look forward to the reinstatement of daily Mass for the laity and themselves as has been repeatedly promised by Bishop Olson after the civil litigation ended."

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Though the nuns are cloistered, Sharp recently spoke to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, and said "it's like a crucifixion seeing (Gerlach) dragged through the mud."

Sharp told the newspaper that late last year, Gerlach — outside of confession — told the vicar general of the diocese, the Very Rev. Jonathan Wallis, that she had broken her chastity vow with a priest from outside the diocese. Gerlach thought she was speaking to him in confidence, Sharp said, and was taking medication for seizures and not in her right mind. Wallis reported the conversation to Olson.

"Even though I knew very well and could see that she was not doing well during those days, he seemed oblivious," Sharp told the Star-Telegram. "For heaven's sake he has known her for years, of course she wasn't thinking right! What she was saying to him was mostly in her imagination."

The nuns also allege that Gerlach was under the influence of anesthesia and pain medicine when Olson interviewed her in April.

The diocese said in a statement that Olson remains the superior of the monastery and Gerlach remains on administrative leave during the appeal, the Star-Telegram reported. Daily Mass is provided for the nuns but remains closed to the public.

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