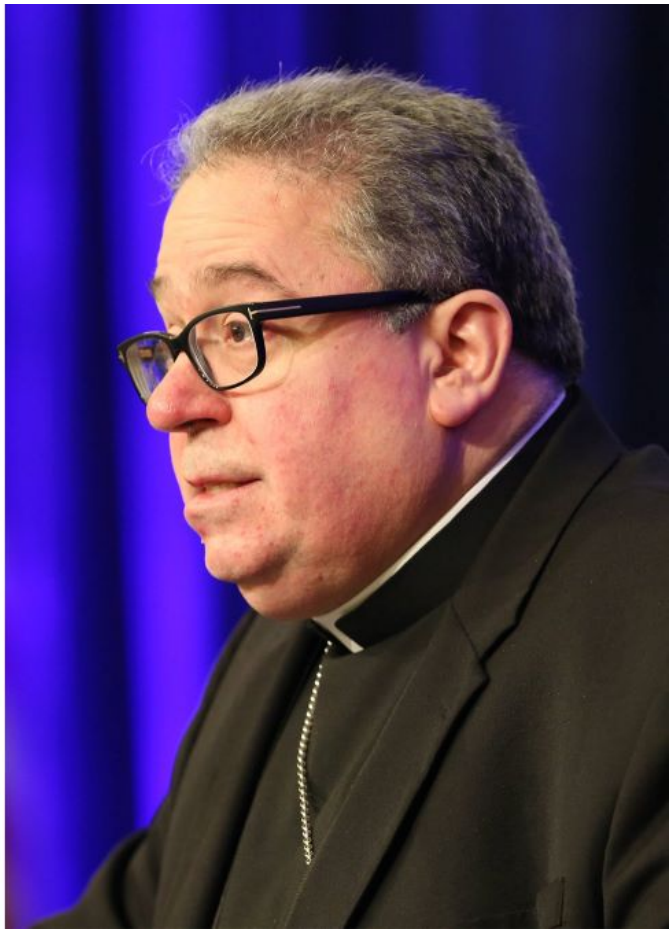
News





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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A community of cloistered Carmelite nuns in Arlington, Texas, said they no longer recognize the authority of Bishop Michael F. Olson of Fort Worth, claiming that he has interfered with and humiliated them since initiating an investigation into their prioress in late April.

"In recent months our Monastery in general and our Mother Prioress in particular have been subjected to unprecedented interference, intimidation, aggression, private and public humiliation and spiritual manipulation as the direct result of the attitudes and ambitions of the current Bishop of Fort Worth in respect of our Reverend Mother Prioress, ourselves and of our property," the nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity said in an Aug. 18 statement posted to their website's homepage.

The nuns said that due to the bishop's alleged treatment of them, they "no longer recognize the authority of, and can have no further relations with, the current Bishop of Fort Worth or his officials, and forbid him or any of his officials or representatives to enter our monastery property or to have any contact or relations with the monastery or any of its nuns or novices," the 1,120-word statement said. "No one who abuses us as has the current Bishop of Fort Worth, has any right to our cooperation or obedience."

"For our own spiritual and psychological safety, and in justice, we must remain independent of this Bishop until such time as he repents of the abuse to which he has subjected us, apologizes in person to our community for it and accepts to make due public reparation," the statement continued. "Should that day never arrive, we hope and pray that in due course his successor will be a God-given instrument of that reparation and healing which, in justice, is now due."

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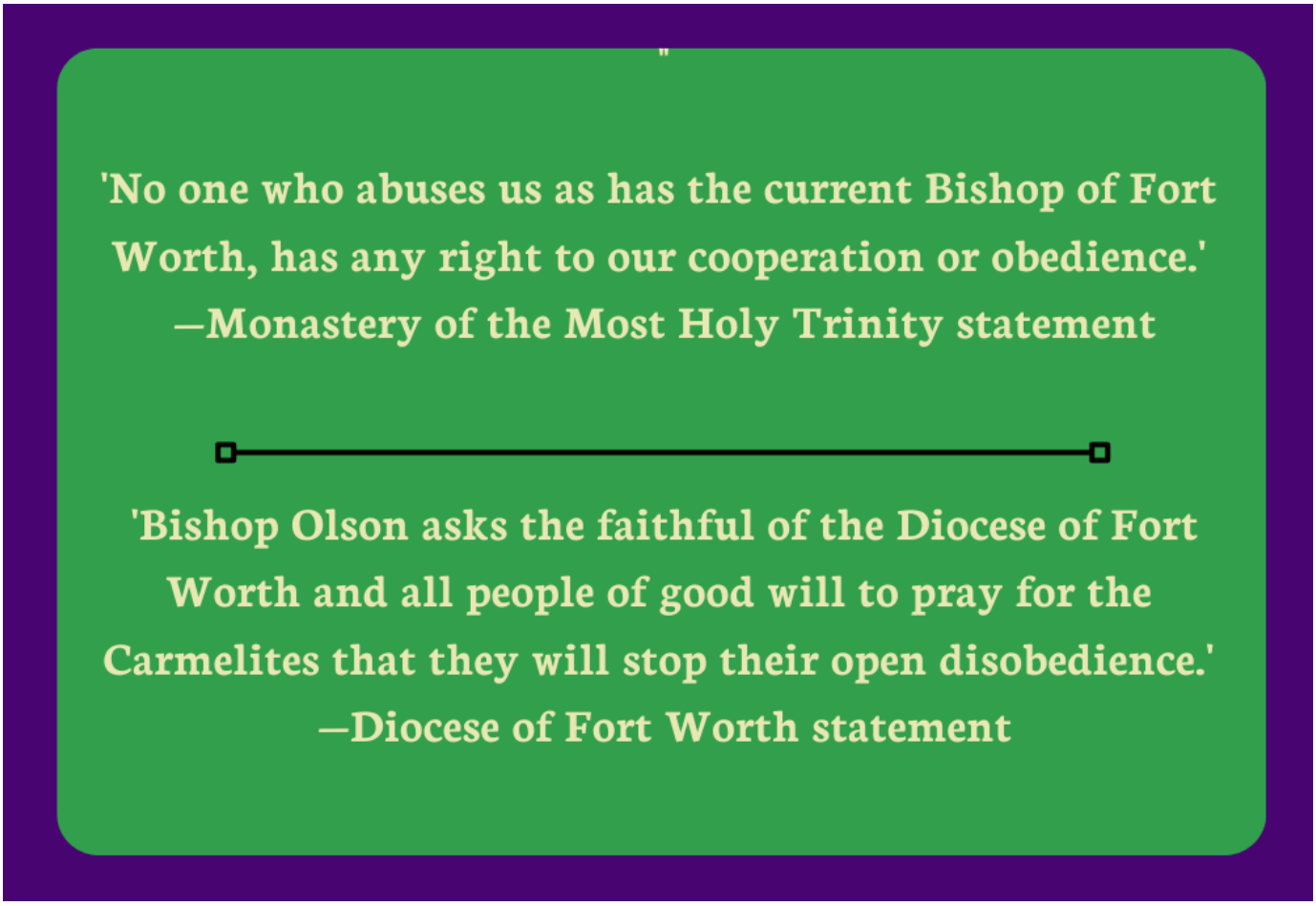
In an Aug. 18 statement, the Diocese of Fort Worth said that it and Bishop Olson "have not been notified of this dangerously rebellious decision by the dismissed

prioress and the other nuns to reject formally the authority of the Holy See to name Bishop Olson as Pontifical Commissary and acting superior of the Arlington Carmel with the associated rights and duties of oversight."

"Bishop Olson asks the faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth and all people of good will to pray for the Carmelites that they will stop their open disobedience," it said.

In late April, Olson initiated an investigation under church law of the community's prioress, Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach of Jesus Crucified, looking into allegations of her breaking chastity vows via "video chat" with a priest. The priest was later revealed to be Fr. Philip Johnson from the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, who, at the time of the alleged inappropriate communications, was living at a Transalpine Redemptorist monastery in Forsyth, Montana.

Mother Teresa Agnes and the sisters filed a lawsuit against Olson and the diocese in early May alleging that they had been harassed and that the bishop had illegally seized their electronic communications devices in an effort to obtain their mailing lists. In mid-May, the bishop responded to the lawsuit with a statement that publicized that he was investigating Mother Teresa Agnes for violating chastity. Over the course of the following weeks, the civil suit progressed alongside the canonical process, with Mother Teresa Agnes filing an additional civil defamation claim. On June 30, a Texas district court judge dismissed the nuns' lawsuit.



The same day, Arlington police concluded an investigation into both parties and declined to file criminal charges. Earlier in June, the police had 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.

The hearing came a month after the Vatican granted Olson governance authority over the sisters May 31. The following day, the bishop issued a decree finding Mother Teresa Agnes guilty of violating her chastity vows and dismissing her from the Carmelite order.

As the investigation evolved, Mother Teresa Agnes, 43, revealed that she is in poor health. The civil court hearing included an audio recording from Olson's April visit to the monastery to initiate the investigation, in which she 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, and that her testimony was given while she was under the influence of prescribed sedatives.

In the Aug. 18 statement, the Carmelites said that they "remain utterly faithful to the doctrine of the Catholic Church and to affirm that the Pope and the Bishop of Fort Worth, whomever they are today or whomever they may be in the future, shall always be prayed for in this monastery, most especially in the Canon of the Mass."

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Acknowledging that they can "expect much rhetoric to the contrary, maybe even sanctions," the sisters emphasized they "are breaking Communion with no one."

"We are simply stating that the abuse to which we have been subjected is so gravely unjust and intolerably destructive of the vocation to which we are vowed before Almighty God, that in conscience that abuse cannot be cooperated with," they said. "This is no rejection of any article of Catholic faith or morals. Rather, it is a statement that, in these particular and peculiar circumstances, in conscience before Almighty God, we cannot permit this Diocesan Bishop to continue his abusive behavior towards us any longer."

In its Aug. 18 statement, the diocese said, "Bishop Olson and the Diocese of Fort Worth stand with Pope Francis and will remain faithful to the canonical process that is currently underway."

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