News



The gates of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas, home of the Discalced Carmelite nuns, are seen Aug. 10, 2023. The nuns have been in a dispute with the bishop of Fort Worth for more than a year. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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The yearlong dispute between a cloistered order of Carmelites and their local bishop — a saga that has included a lawsuit, allegations of adultery and drug use, recordings of the superior's interrogation, denial of the sacraments, allegations the bishop was trying to steal their valuable property, appeals to the Vatican and threats of excommunication — continues as church officials issued orders to end the conflict that were rejected by the nuns.

On April 22, the Discalced Carmelite nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas, filed a request for a restraining order against Fort Worth Bishop Michael Olson, the Fort Worth Diocese, and the association of contemplative orders the Vatican appointed to govern them, the Dallas Morning News reported April 23.

The newspaper reported that Matthew Bobo, the nuns' attorney, accused Olson of trying to take over the monastery "under the guise of some religious backdoor," in court filings. A hearing is set for April 25 in the 141st District Court in Fort Worth.

CBS Texas reported that the filing includes an affidavit from Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach warning that once the association is in control, it can do anything it wishes, including taking the monastery.

"If we were to lose control of the Corporation and its assets it would allow the Defendants to remove us from our home, as they have already threatened to do," she wrote. "I pray they be stopped."

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On April 18, the Fort Worth Diocese published a decree from the Vatican's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life saying the governance of the monastery had been entrusted to the president and council of the Carmelite Association of Christ the King in the United States of America. The diocese also published a letter from the dicastery to Olson thanking him for "heroic and thankless service," and a letter from the dicastery to the Carmelites, directing them to withdraw their Aug. 18 statement publicly rejecting Olson's authority and prohibiting him from the monastery and grounds.

The decree and letters are signed by Sr. Simona Brambilla, secretary of the dicastery.

On April 20, the sisters published a statement on their website, noting that the documents were published before they had ever seen them and that the decisions were made with no discussion or even advance notice. The statement calls governance by the association "a hostile takeover that we cannot in conscience accept."

"Accordingly, neither the President of the Association of Christ the King, nor any delegate of hers, is welcome to enter our monastery at this time," the statement says.

It goes on to say they continue to reject Olson's authority because, "In these extraordinary circumstances, we have had to withdraw our cooperation in respect of the unjust exercise of any authority over us by the current Bishop of Fort Worth," and hints at Olson's controversial tenure as bishop. "Let it be said clearly — to borrow a phrase — that authority without integrity is no authority at all. Anyone who knows the workings of our diocese will understand the reality we face only too well."

Tangled dispute

The dispute began last year when Olson began investigating allegations Gerlach had broken her vow of chastity and committed sins against the Sixth Commandment, which forbids adultery. After Olson refused to allow Gerlach's choice of canon lawyers to represent her and instead appointed his own choice, the nuns sued in county court, alleging Olson had violated their privacy and stolen electronics.

They later added defamation charges after Olson made the allegations against Gerlach public in an announcement on the diocesan website.

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.





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)

The lawsuit was dismissed June 30 when the county court ruled the allegations were church matters, not civil law issues. At a hearing, testimony said the alleged relationship was only via phone and not in person.

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.

The nuns planned to appeal their lawsuit being dismissed. They later dropped that idea when Vatican officials said they would not hear Gerlach's appeal of her dismissal from the Carmelites until any civil cases were resolved.

In August, the sisters issued a statement rejecting Olson's authority and barring him from the monastery. Olson responded by saying Gerlach may have excommunicated herself and the other sisters may do the same if they continue to follow her.

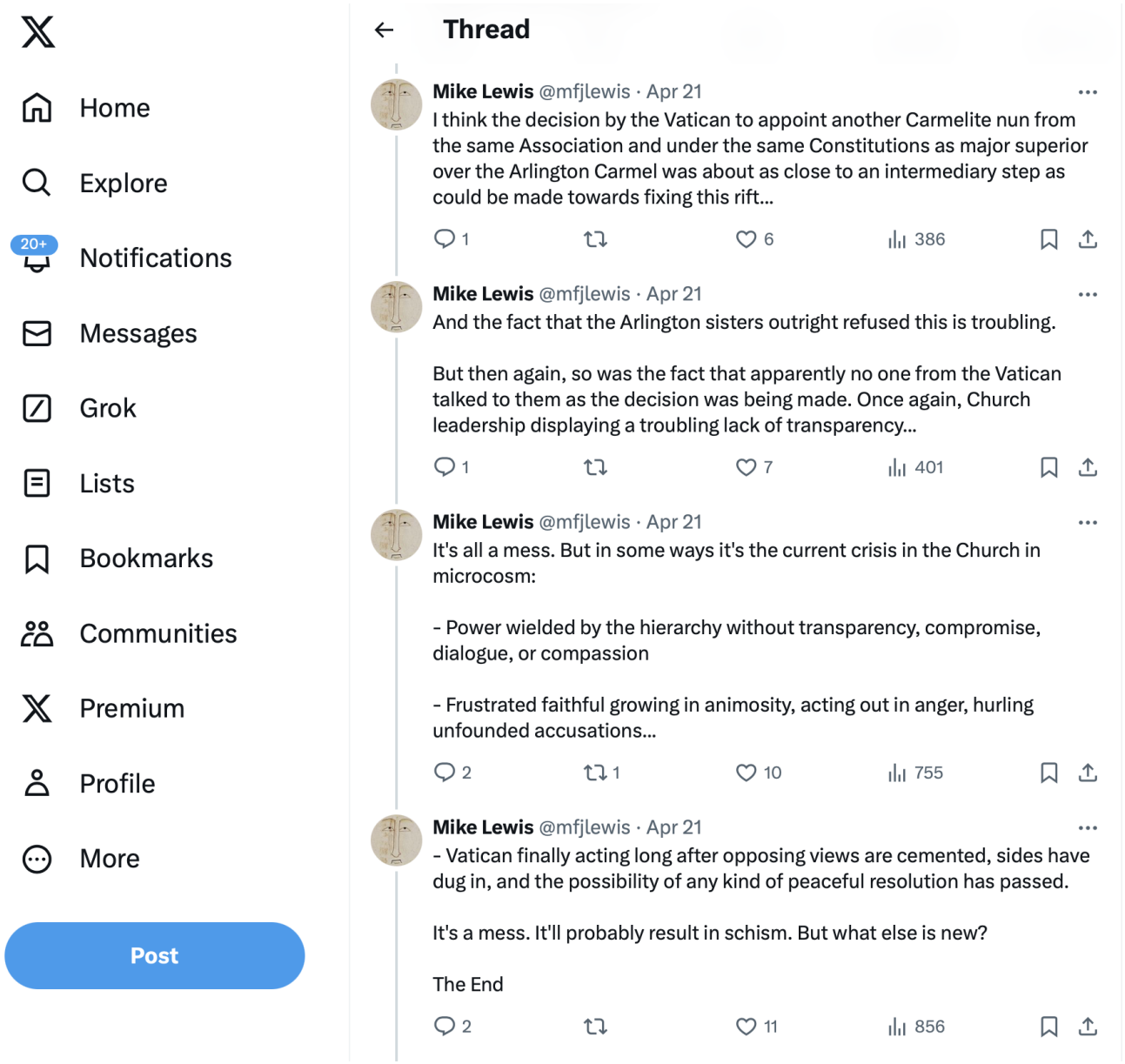
It is unclear what is happening with Gerlach's appeal to the Vatican. Their April 20 statement says that a response to their appeal was "promised by the Secretary of the Dicastery in a letter to us received in early February," and notes that appeals are not normally pre-empted by other actions.

In addition, the letter from Brambilla to the sisters says that "the terms of office of the prioress, subprioress, and councillors expired" on Jan. 8, and that it appears they have not held an election. "Thus, this curial office finds that, in the present instance, the Carmel's 'genuine autonomy' is lacking due to a total absence of lawful governance," requiring the monastery be entrusted to the Association of Christ the King.

But the letter makes no mention of Gerlach being expelled; and the sisters' statement notes that "It is our understanding that while matters are under appeal, nothing is to be changed and the status quo is to be preserved," meaning Gerlach is still a Carmelite and superior of the monastery.

Olson responded to the sisters' April 20 statement rejecting the decree with a statement published the same day, calling their actions "sad and troubling."

"It is a slap at the nuns who are their sisters in the Carmelite order," he wrote. "It is an apparent rejection of the ministry of the Holy See's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life."



Mike Lewis, author of the Where Peter Is blog, wrote April 21 on X, formerly known as Twitter, about the dispute between the Arlington, Texas, Discalced Carmelites and the bishop of Fort Worth. (GSR photo/Twitter)

'Lack of transparency'

Mike Lewis, author of the Where Peter Is blog, where he has written extensively about the case, wrote April 21 on X, formerly known as Twitter, that it has followed a familiar and disappointing pattern.

"I think the decision by the Vatican to appoint another Carmelite nun from the same Association and under the same Constitutions as major superior over the Arlington

Carmel was about as close to an intermediary step as could be made toward fixing this rift … and the fact that the Arlington sisters outright refused this is troubling," he wrote. "But then again, so was the fact that apparently no one from the Vatican talked to them as the decision was being made. Once again, Church leadership displaying a troubling lack of transparency."

Lewis went on to write that in some ways it is the current situation in the Catholic Church in microcosm: Power wielded by the hierarchy without transparency, compromise, dialogue or compassion; frustrated faithful growing in animosity, acting out in anger, hurling unfounded accusations; and the Vatican finally acting long after opposing views are cemented, sides have dug in, and the possibility of any kind of peaceful resolution has passed.

In a statement published with the decree on April 18, Oslon requested prayers.

"I ask the faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth and all people of good will to continue to pray with me for the Catholic Church in North Texas, in particular the Arlington Carmelites, as we persevere together in service to Christ through ministry to our community," he wrote.

The Carmelites, too, asked for prayers.

"We pray that the Bishop of Fort Worth will repent of his abuse, apologize for it publicly as well as to us in person, and make due reparation to the Monastery," they wrote. "We wish nothing more than to live our vocation in peace and tranquility with and under the legitimate pastors of the Church and to enjoy their paternal care and protection and we shall continue to pray that the dawn of the day when normal relations with the local Bishop can be restored, and the mutual respect that must involve, will come soon."

But they went on to write that an abusive father must be resisted, saying "We take Pope Francis at his word when he invited Consecrated Women 'to fight when, in some cases, they are treated unfairly, even within the Church … at times, by men of the Church.' "

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