News



The Vatican has reversed the dismissal of the prioress of the Order of Discalced Carmelite in Arlington, Texas, after a yearlong battle with the local bishop. Mother Superior Teresa Agnes Gerlach, front, and another member of the community are pictured in this undated photo featured in a CBS News Texas story June 8, 2023. (GSR screenshot/CBS News Texas)



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The dismissal of the prioress of the Arlington, Texas, Carmelite monastery, which has been battling its diocesan bishop for more than a year, has been reversed.

In statements and decrees posted to the Diocese of Fort Worth website May 22, Bishop Michael Olson announced the Vatican accepted the appeal of Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach and nullified her dismissal from the contemplative order of Carmelites. Olson had dismissed her from the order June 1, 2023, after a controversial investigation into allegations she had broken the Sixth Commandment against adultery and violated her vow of chastity.

The Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, in a decree dated April 30 and signed by the dicastery prefect, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, said the dismissal had invalidating errors in procedendo et in decernendo (in procedure and substance).

Olson had found Gerlach abused her authority because as prioress she had the unique privilege of having access to electronic means of communication. Olson accused Gerlach of using her phone to share explicit photos with Fr. Philip Johnson, a priest from Raleigh, North Carolina, who was on leave in Montana at the time of the alleged actions.

But Braz de Aviz wrote that there was no proof Gerlach used her authority to coerce another person into a sexual act, nor did she have any authority over Johnson to abuse.

Olson has said he reported the allegations against Johnson to the Diocese of Raleigh, but Johnson refused to cooperate with the investigation and Olson has heard nothing since.

"I made that report approximately one year ago and have regularly inquired about the progress of their investigation into the priest's role in the misconduct revealed by Mother Teresa Agnes," Olson wrote in a statement. "I still await the results of the investigation into the misconduct I reported to the Diocese of Raleigh for the sake of transparency and accountability for all involved."

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Olson had also cited grave disobedience to a superior as reason for dismissal, but the dicastery said the charge was invalid because Gerlach was not given the full 15 days to respond to canonical warnings, as required by Canon 697.

Though Gerlach's dismissal was nullified, the nuns had also appealed Olson's investigation itself, saying he lacked authority to conduct it; his "precautionary suspension from office" of Gerlach as prioress during the investigation; and his warning of the nuns that further obstructions of his investigation could result in penalties after they stopped cooperating and denied him entrance to the monastery.

Those appeals were all denied, however, with the dicastery pointing out that in 2020, the monastery petitioned and was allowed to change from observing the 1991 constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite order, which put them under the authority of the Carmelite Fathers in Rome, to the 1990 constitutions, which put them under "the special vigilance of the diocesan Bishop." They were one of seven communities petitioning to create and join the new Association of Christ the King, which was granted.

On April 18, the Vatican entrusted the governance of the monastery to the president and council of the Association of Christ the King, and in a letter from the dicastery to the Carmelites, directed them to withdraw their Aug. 18 statement publicly rejecting Olson's authority and prohibiting him from the monastery and grounds.

The nuns issued a statement two days later that 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. On April 22, they filed a request for a restraining order against Olson, the diocese and the association, but withdrew it about a week later.

In a May 22 statement, Mother Marie of the Incarnation, president of the association, said she attempted to visit the monastery that day to deliver the Vatican decrees, but was denied entrance.

Mother Marie of the Incarnation's statement includes a statement she said she intended to issue to the faithful of the Fort Worth Diocese on April 20, but delayed because of the court filing.

"Undoubtedly, the Arlington Carmel is a blessing and a source of grace for the Diocese of Fort Worth," the statement says. "I pledge to do all I can to preserve and increase this blessing for you, the faithful of Fort Worth. I know that your Bishop, His Excellency, Michael F. Olson, has your good and the good of the Sisters at heart, now as always."

Olson's May 22 statement says governance of the monastery by the association will benefit all the nuns there.

"This appointment by the Dicastery offers Mother Teresa Agnes the opportunity to seek restoration and recovery to live as a faithful member of the Carmelite Order in accordance with her religious vows but without the burdens of leadership that come with the office of prioress," his statement says. "It will also ensure that all the nuns within the monastery can be heard, rightly cared for and nurtured in their religious life in full communion with the Catholic Church. As their Bishop, I stand ready to pastorally assist the nuns of the Arlington Carmel."

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