

Nuns honor Elizabeth Johnson, theologian criticized by U.S. bishops

by [Heidi Hall](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

Sister Elizabeth Johnson, who drew U.S. Catholic bishops' ire with what they consider to be radical feminist writings, received the top award of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious August 15 at its assembly in Nashville, Tennessee.

In her acceptance speech, the Fordham University theology professor lambasted the bishops for their criticism of her book *Quest for the Living God*, saying it appears they haven't read it.

"To this day, no one, not myself or the theological community, the media, or the general public, knows what doctrinal issue is at stake," she told the assembly of about 900 sisters representing 80 percent of the nation's nuns.

In her 20-minute acceptance speech, followed by a standing ovation, Johnson suggested the conference's support of her work prompted the investigation by the church's top enforcer of orthodoxy, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

Johnson's book includes chapters on black and feminist theology and interfaith engagement. She said book sales skyrocketed after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops criticized it.

The LCWR has been undergoing a Vatican-ordered doctrinal investigation since 2009. In 2012, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ordered the nuns' group to reform its statutes and appointed Seattle archbishop J. Peter Sartain to oversee changes, including a rewrite of the group's charter and approval of all speakers at future assemblies. In April, a top Vatican official warned the LCWR that in honoring Johnson it would provoke the Holy See.

"When the moral authority of the hierarchy is hemorrhaging due to financial scandals and many bishops who . . . cover up sexual abuse of children, a cover-up that continues in some quarters to this day, and thousands are drifting away from the church . . . the waste of time on this investigation is unconscionable," Johnson said.

Throughout the week, the conference's leaders discussed spirituality and doctrine while taking up church politics in closed sessions. The nuns declined any interviews about the conflict.

But the ongoing dispute broke into the open at times.

Sister Nancy Schreck, a former LCWR president who delivered the keynote address, said in an interview before the assembly that the LCWR's focus is the life of Jesus.

"Look at the four Gospels—they all have nuances in who Jesus is," she said. "We need to figure out how we translate the message of Jesus to the world where we live. We need every creative interpretation of looking of Jesus that we can get."

It's unlikely the sides can come to a solution, said Bruce Morrill, a Vanderbilt University professor of theological studies and a Jesuit priest.

At the conflict's heart is a difference in approach to a hierarchical chain of command: the top-down, morals-emphasizing Vatican versus the collegial, social justice-oriented nuns.

"As far as the U.S. bishops and Vatican officials are concerned, this is not a debate," Morrill said. "The hierarchy expects the women religious to obey their directives."  
—RNS

*This article was edited September 3, 2014.*