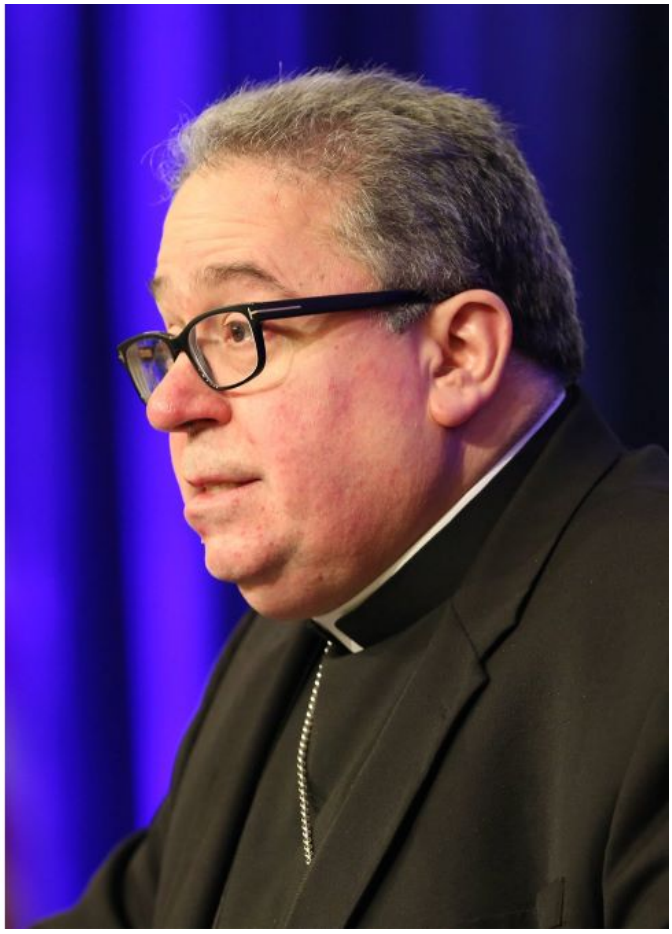
News



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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Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, says the nun at the center of a dispute over allegedly broken vows may be excommunicated, along with the rest of the nuns in Arlington, Texas, where she is mother superior.

On Aug. 18, the Discalced Carmelite nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity posted a statement on their website stating 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."

"No one who abuses us as has the current Bishop of Fort Worth, has any right to our cooperation or obedience," the statement said.

In response that same day, the Fort Worth Diocese said that it and 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."

The next day, Aug. 19, a "Statement to the Faithful" by Olson was posted to the diocesan website, calling Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach's actions "publicly scandalous and schismatic."

"Thus, it is with deep sorrow that I must inform the faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth, that Mother Teresa Agnes, thereby, may have incurred upon herself *latae sententiae*, (i.e., by her own schismatic actions), excommunication. The other nuns, depending on their complicity in Mother Teresa Agnes' publicly scandalous and schismatic actions could possibly have incurred the same *latae sententiae* excommunication."

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Latae sententiae excommunication is when Catholics guilty of certain offenses are automatically excommunicated, even if church officials do not know about them. It is reserved for sins such as heresy, violating the seal of confession, or procuring an

abortion. CatholicCulture.com describes excommunication as someone who "no longer has the right to the sacraments of the church, and is not considered a Catholic unless or until the excommunication is lifted."

The dispute began 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.

The lawsuit was dismissed June 30 when the county court ruled the allegations were church matters, not civil law issues, but not until after a hearing where 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, but later dropped that idea when Vatican officials said they would not hear Gerlich's appeal of her dismissal from the Carmelites until any civil cases were resolved.

Olson said in the Aug. 19 statement that laity cannot attend Mass at the monastery, writing, "The Arlington Carmel remains closed to public access until such time as the Arlington Carmel publicly disavows itself of these scandalous and schismatic actions of Mother Teresa Agnes."

But the nuns in their Aug. 18 statement said, "Our monastery chapel is and shall remain open to all who, in good faith wish to pray there or to participate in the liturgical rites we celebrate, regardless of any protestations that those who have abused us may wish to make in this respect."

Their Aug. 18 statement also said they are not being schismatic:

> We can, no doubt, expect much rhetoric to the contrary, maybe even sanctions, but *we* 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. 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.

Olson said he wants to help and mourns the loss of his relationship with the sisters.

"This has hurt me as a friend and as the bishop because of the deep wound this has cut in our unity as the Diocese of Fort Worth. ... I have personally relied on their prayers and have enjoyed a spiritual friendship with so many of the nuns," his statement says. "I stand ready to assist Mother Teresa Agnes on her path of reconciliation and healing. Please join me in praying for the nuns, and the restoration of order and stability to our beloved Arlington Carmel."

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