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Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, leads morning prayer in a file photo from Sept. 21, 2018. (OSV News/CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

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The scandal that has unfolded in recent months involving Bishop Michael Olson of Fort Worth, Texas, and the Discalced Carmelite nuns of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas, has much more behind it than only the purported transgressions by Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach or the sisters in the 10-member community who remain loyal to her. Instead, the tawdry soap opera drama orchestrated by Olson has everything to do with his heavy-handedness and his cruel treatment of a congregation of women religious whose real transgression, it appears, is to oppose him and his supposed authority.

Regardless of the he said-she said twists and turns of this case, Olson's lack of pastoral care, privacy and respect for Gerlach and the sisters is appalling. Even if the allegations he publicly revealed were true — a case of alleged phone sex by a priest with an ailing woman who uses a wheelchair — to publicly humiliate her and the congregation, impose his authority over the congregation and lecture the lay community supportive of the sisters if they dare challenge him, already went beyond norms of pastoral and normal bishop behavior as the case unfolded in May and June.

On Aug. 18, the sisters issued a public statement on their website declaring their loyalty to Gerlach, saying they didn't recognize Olson's authority and forbidding him or his officials to enter the monastery property. "No one who abuses us as has the current Bishop of Fort Worth, has any right to our cooperation or obedience."

In response — really, in retaliation — Olson then issued a "Statement to the Faithful" calling Gerlach's actions "publicly scandalous and schismatic" and saying that she, and the nuns, "depending on their complicity," could have incurred upon themselves *latae sententiae*, (i.e., by their actions), excommunication. The sisters on Aug. 26 reiterated that they didn't recognize Olson's authority and "will face with serenity and firmness any unjust canonical sanctions that the present Ordinary may inflict on them, in the awareness that his authority cannot demand obedience towards him when he himself is first in disobedience to the authority of God."

The whole affair smacks of an authoritarianism all too common in centuries past by bishops over women religious communities. The biographies of many of the foundresses and the histories of women religious communities recount how congregations often formed, survived and eventually thrived in spite of, not because of, bishops who sought to assert ecclesiastical authority, seize the sisters' property and control their congregations.

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We needn't go back centuries — really only little more than a decade — to witness examples of heavy-handedness by Vatican officials and U.S. bishops in the apostolic visitation of women religious congregations in the U.S. between 2008 and 2012. That controversial six-year investigation produced a final report in 2014 which generally lauded the sisters' work for the church, but it was a painful and divisive period. The concurrent doctrinal assessment by the Vatican of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that began in 2009 and resulted in a mandate issued in 2012 also revealed an authoritarianism, though the sisters continually sought communication and dialogue with church officials while implementing reforms and maintaining the integrity of the organization.

Other women religious congregations in the U.S. and elsewhere are watching the proceedings in Texas closely. It's quite understandable. As their numbers dwindle, the concern is whether they, too, could be subject to such authoritarian actions by local bishops. They can and should double-check their own constitutions and governance papers with canon lawyers and, perhaps also, the deeds to their properties. While the constitution and governance documents of the Arlington Carmelites give the bishop some authority, he still must follow canon law and his actions must be approved by the congregation's leadership council.

Olson is no stranger to controversy. In 2022 he demanded the resignation of the head of Catholic Charities Fort Worth over a women's empowerment event, ultimately canceled, that he deemed incompatible with Catholic teaching.

The scandal in Texas is one the Catholic Church could do without. With all the other crises and issues before the church, picking on a group of women whose ministry is prayer would not seem to be at the top of the priorities and is beneath the dignity of the office of a bishop. In the preparation for the upcoming Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis has called for a more pastoral, welcoming and listening church. It would be wise for Olson to heed and adopt that approach. If he cannot, we hope that the Vatican will stop this abusive power play.

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