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Vatican suppresses Carmelite monastery following long-running controversy



The Reverend Mother Superior Teresa Agnes Gerlach of the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas. | Credit: Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity Discalced Carmelite Nuns



By Kate Quiñones

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The Vatican has suppressed the Carmelite Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Arlington, Texas, following a long-running controversy in which the prioress was found guilty of having broken her vow of chastity.

Bishop Michael Olson of the Diocese of Fort Worth announced on Monday that he received a **decree of suppression** last week from the Holy See. The decree follows the dismissal of the former nuns in October by their superior after a series of disagreements with the local bishop.

The decree, dated Nov. 28, was signed by Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and Sister Simona Brambilla, MC, the secretary of the dicastery.

The dicastery found the community “extinct” and decreed the suppression of the monastery. The decree of suppression cited the “notorious defection from the Catholic faith,” which led to the dismissal of the five nuns as well as of the monastery’s only novice, amid the expiration of the vows of the seventh member, “thus, leaving the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity with no members.”

Olson announced the suppression on Dec. 2, emphasizing that the women at the monastery “are neither nuns nor Carmelites despite their continued and public self-identification to the contrary.”

He added that “the Holy See has suppressed the monastery, so it exists no longer, despite any public self-identification made to the contrary by the former nuns who continue to occupy the premises.”

In the **letter**, Olson reiterated an earlier announcement that Catholics should not attend Mass celebrated at the former monastery. He noted that any Masses or sacraments celebrated there “are illicit” and that “Catholics do harm to the communion of the Catholic Church by intentionally attending these ceremonies.”

The former nuns had not published a statement in response at the time of publication. Their **website** continues to identify them as “Discalced Carmelite Nuns.”

The controversy began last year when Olson launched an investigation into the monastery and Reverend Mother Teresa Agnes Gerlach, who the bishop said had previously admitted to having conducted an affair with a priest.

The women in May 2023 **filed a lawsuit against Olson over the investigation**, claiming violations of privacy and harming the physical and emotional well-being of the sisters. Olson eventually **dismissed Gerlach from religious life**.

In April of this year, **the Vatican declared** that the Association of Christ the King in the United States of America would oversee the “government, discipline, studies, goods, rights, and privileges” of the Texas monastery.

The women, however, defied the Vatican order, going so far as to **associate with the Society of St. Pius X** (SSPX), a traditionalist group that is not in full

communion with the Catholic Church and has a canonically irregular status.

Mother Marie of the Incarnation, the president of the Association of Christ the King, who was appointed to oversee the women, announced in October that they were **dismissed** from the Order of Discalced Carmelites and “reverted to the lay state.”

“I wish to repeat that since this sad series of events began to unfold in April 2023 when the former prioress self-reported to me her grave failure against the vow of chastity with a priest, I was obliged to begin the search, in accord with canon law, for both justice and mercy for all involved,” Olson said in his letter.

Gerlach’s admission of “her grave failure against the vow of chastity with a priest,” Olson noted, “was recorded and entered into the public record at a civil court hearing” after the former prioress brought a civil lawsuit against Olson and the diocese.

During the June 2023 **court hearing**, Gerlach admitted to breaking her vows of chastity and said that the affair was conducted by phone. Gerlach’s lawyer, Matthew Bobo, said that Gerlach was under the influence of pain medication at the time of the hearing. Gerlach, who was hospitalized for seizures in November 2022, uses a wheelchair and feeding tube.

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In June 2023, the diocese **released photographs** appearing to show cannabis products at the monastery. Bobo called the allegations of drug use “absolutely ridiculous.”

The former nuns’ most recent statement from Oct. 30 maintained that “these assertions are egregiously false.” The October statement rejected the dismissal by Mother Marie, citing their recent affiliation with the Society of St. Pius X as of August.

Olson maintained that the diocese’s “response to their disobedient actions and calumny has consistently been guided by charity, patience, and has been in accord with the instructions of the Holy See.”

Olson asked for prayers for the former nuns, noting that the event brought “great sadness” to the local Church and himself and “perpetrated a deep wound in the Body of Christ.”

“I ask all of you to join me in praying for healing, reconciliation, and for the conversion of these women who have departed from the vowed religious life and notoriously defected from communion with the Catholic Church by their actions,” Olson said.

“Now, as always, I wish them grace and peace in Our Lord, Jesus Christ,” he added.

In a Nov. 29 **letter** to Olson, the secretary of the dicastery assured Olson of the dicastery’s gratitude for his “heroic and thankless service to the local Church,” citing the “hardship and unwarranted public attention” toward the local diocese. The dicastery also called on the faithful to pray for the former nuns.

“This dicastery exhorts all the members of the Discalced Carmelite Order, as well as the faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth, to pray earnestly that the hearts of such as have erred may repent and return to the unity of the truth bestowed on the Church by Our Lord, Jesus Christ,” the decree stated.