

In-between is a dangerous place to be

Joan Chittister | Dec. 15, 2008 From Where I Stand

It is important for Fr. Bourgeois because it involves the possible fracturing of the commitment of a lifetime.

A man who has given his life for the Gospel, been one of the church's most public witnesses for human rights, stood for the best in the human condition and modeled the highest standards of the priesthood should certainly not end his life a victim of the conscience that has stirred the conscience of a nation.

But the way this situation is handled is at least as important to the church as it ever will be to Roy Bourgeois.

Roy, after all, is doing what a Christian is supposed to do: He is speaking for the disenfranchised, pursuing justice, witnessing to the love of God. That has been the Bourgeois story for years. Here is a man who, as a missionary in Bolivia, witnessed the results of SOA training there, and alerted the United States to the torture-teaching practices of the Fort Benning-based School of the Americas. A U.S. military training center designed to terrorize Central-American peasants working for human rights and just wages, this U.S.-funded war against humanity kept many a dictator in power.

Roy's public protests began with a handful of people and has grown to well over 15,000 demonstrators yearly. Thanks to Roy, the public pressure for a change of U.S. policies at the School of the Americas has become one of the country's -- one of the church's -- proudest moments of the last 20 years.

Clearly, Roy is a priest whose courage and credibility have been tested by the State to the maximum. He's not marginal to anything: measured by the best standards of both church and state, he is completely priest, completely American.

The whole truth, however, is that this particular story is embedded in a struggle that is much larger than Roy. It is the story of how the church itself will, this time, deal with the birth pangs of conscience and consciousness that mark any society in the midst of change. The church has been in this situation before and the responses, to our shame, have not always, in the chastening light of history, been good ones.

No wonder that in his opening address to Vatican Council II, Pope John XXIII said to the bishops assembled from around the world: The church has always opposed errors regarding the faith and, in the past, did so *with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.*

It was neither a pietistic nor an idle statement.

Who at that Council, for instance, -- who in that Church -- did not know that punishment and exclusion had been the hallmark of the church for centuries before Vatican II?

Excommunicated saints dot the history of the church with far too much regularity: Mary Ward, whose sin was the founding a religious life for women that did not require cloister; Mary McKillop whose sin was opening Catholic centers without the permission of the bishop; the Beguines, a community of non-cloistered women in Belgium, whose sin was walking the streets and ministering in homes; Teilhard de Chardin whose sin was the acceptance of the theory of evolution; Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, OMI whose sin was to seek new ways to transmit the doctrine of original sin in an Asian culture. All were precursors of momentous social change whose concerns were not only ignored by the church but punished.

When the dust settled, however, nobody remembered who excommunicated the saints who were pioneering a new church but everybody remembers the saints. And everybody came to believe what the saints had attempted to teach.

Reformers who centuries ago called for discussion of the sale of relics, the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, the review of a theology that divided people according to "higher" and "lower" vocations were also excommunicated. Wars were fought and people died by the thousands on both sides in the attempt to impose Catholic orthodoxy. Nations were divided to maintain Catholicism. Women were burned at the stake in behalf of Catholic doctrine. And, in Germany, for instance, one woman was executed simply for owning a bible in German. And all those things were done in the name of God.

But with what success? The effects are painfully clear to this very day.

Nobody remembers the "sins" of the reformers. Everybody remembers the sin of a church that refused to listen to their concerns and is still 400 years late repenting it. And the things the reformers argued for are now, finally, part and parcel of Catholicism itself.

Were all the lives lost, all the excommunications worth it? Do we never learn?

In fact, who in our own time does not know of pre-Vatican II church laws that excommunicated Catholics for marrying Protestants, or of "sins" committed and confessed by families who attended those weddings? Or, for the sake of family, worshipped with them in those churches despite the bans? Or, prodded by even more demanding consciences, suffered through brutal marriages that finally ended in brutal divorces and then, for their trouble, were denied the sacraments? Who now will defend such things in the name of either fidelity or obedience?

The most painful question of all, however, is has anything really changed, however much Pope John XXIII might have hoped otherwise?

In our own time, church by fear and intimidation is clearly on the brink of becoming the norm again.

Whole groups are being excommunicated everywhere: Call to Action, Dignity, parishes that seek more participation in making parish decisions, and the Women's Ordination Conference. Even people who voted for Barack Obama have been told by some priests and bishops that they need to go to confession before they go to communion. And, of course, Roman Catholic Womenpriests is an excommunicated group, as well. Despite the fact that over two-thirds of the U.S. Catholic church approves of the ordination of women, the discussion goes on being repressed, rebuffed and disregarded. (Survey of US Catholics, NCR)

People respond in different ways to this kind of church, of course: Some say, "Love it or leave it." Some say, "Someone had to do it and we agree with them so count us in on the excommunication." Some say, "How is it that we excommunicate priests who stand for the expansion of women's roles in the church but we do not excommunicate pedophile priests who abuse children." And some say nothing -- in public. But they say a great

deal in private -- to their friends, to their local priests and, most of all, to their children who, as a result, carry within them the vision of another world to come.

Oh, intimidation does its job, of course. At least for awhile. Only 33 religious of the 3,000 people who signed an early petition to Rome in Roy Bourgeois' behalf, for instance, used the initials of their religious communities on the petition. But many other religious signed and did not. That's a sure sign of their concern that their communities would be punished if their identities were known. But they did sign. They do believe. They are talking. They are taking a stand.

So, who is winning? The enforcers or the believers? Well, it depends on what you mean by 'winning.' History is clear: It is one thing to enforce behavior, it is another thing entirely to attempt to chain the mind or enslave the heart forever.

From where I stand, it seems to me that now may well be a time when the church should proceed with great tenderness, an open mind, a listening heart -- and a clear sense that, just as in times past, God's future is on the way.

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