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Maryknoll order discontinues grant funding SOA Watch

by Heidi Schlumpf



Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois demonstrates outside a congressional office building in Washington in April 2007. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The American missionary order Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers has discontinued a longstanding annual grant to the antimilitary campaign group School of Americas Watch because the organization's founder, Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois, publicly supports women's ordination.

Given Fr. Bourgeois' central role as the founder and public face of the SOA Watch, [Maryknoll] society leadership has determined that it cannot continue its financial support of that organization without giving the impression that it also supports the actions of its leader concerning the issue of women's ordination, said a Maryknoll statement.

The statement is dated May 24 but was not made public until July 22 after SOA Watch announced a fundraising drive to replace the \$17,000 grant. Within a week, the fund drive had raised nearly \$10,000.

Bourgeois, 72, has worked for 20 years to close the U.S. Army's Western Hemisphere Institute for

Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas, which is a training school for soldiers from Latin American countries. Many graduates of the school have been linked to coups, death squads and human rights abuses across Latin America.

In 2008, church officials said Bourgeois was excommunicated *latae sententiae*, or automatically, for participating in an ordination through the Roman Catholic Womenpriests organization, which has ordained more than 100 women worldwide and claims apostolic succession.

Many Catholics, including some Maryknoll members, were shocked that the order -- long considered one of the most progressive and revered for its justice work among the poor around the world -- would punish a worthy organization, not to mention the poor of Latin America served by it.

Maryknoll Fr. Joe Veneroso admits the order was in an awkward position. "This is not an action Maryknoll would have taken lightly, given the disappointment, anger and loss of support for Maryknoll that would result," he said. "The SOA Watch will get through this. Sadly, the only loser seems to be Maryknoll."

The Maryknoll statement says the decision "is not intended to be punitive and is not designed to put pressure on Fr. Bourgeois, or on the SOA Watch organization and its activities." It was made after a May meeting between Bourgeois and Superior General Fr. Edward Dougherty, according to James McCullough, Maryknoll's interim media representative. "There was no external pressure from the Vatican or any other organization," McCullough said.

This marks the third time in as many months that repercussions for those involved in women's ordinations have been in the news. In May a recently ordained woman who died of cancer was refused a funeral at her Chicago parish, and earlier in July the Vatican declared the attempted ordination of women a major church crime -- at the same time it labeled sexual abuse of a minor with a similar designation.

The May meeting between Bourgeois and his superior came near the end of a multicity "Shatter the Stained-Glass Ceiling" speaking tour during which Bourgeois repeated his belief that excluding women from the priesthood is sexism and a sin. The tour was organized by the church reform group Call to Action.

Call to Action's executive director praised Bourgeois and encouraged its members to financially support SOA Watch. "While we are troubled by this decision, we are heartened by Roy Bourgeois and other priests of courage who stand with the movement for women's equality in the church and do not let a decision like this stop their advocacy," Jim FitzGerald wrote in a July 22 e-mail.

SOA Watch officials called the grant loss "significant" to its \$360,000 annual budget. In a July 27 email, SOA thanked donors to its "\$17 for \$17,000" campaign and reaffirmed the organization's respect for Maryknoll missionaries. "They are men and women who work for social and economic justice, who strive to promote peace, human rights and respect for the integrity of creation, and who advocate strongly for an end to torture," the e-mail said.

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Despite his excommunication, Bourgeois remains a member of the Maryknoll order. "The hope expressed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is that [Bourgeois] will recant his views and return to full communion with the church," said McCullough. "The society continues its pastoral support of Roy

and remains committed to his reconciliation to the church.?

In a telephone interview July 28, Bourgeois seemed far from recanting. He told *NCR*, "I believe that God calls women as well as men to be priests."

[Heidi Schlumpf is a frequent contributor to *NCR*.]

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