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Maryknoll gives Bourgeois notice of removal from order

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 29, 2011

Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois speaks to a supporter at the SOA Watch vigil outside the gates of Fort Benning, Ga., Nov. 21. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the longtime peace activist and founder of SOA Watch, has received a letter from his order giving him 15 days to ?publicly recant? his support of women?s ordination or face dismissal from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

The letter, which is dated March 18, is signed by Maryknoll Fr. Edward Dougherty, the order?s superior general, and Fr. Edward McGovern, its secretary general, and warns Bourgeois that his dismissal will also be forwarded to the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith ?with a request for laicization.?

NCR received the letter in a fax from Bourgeois this morning.

Bourgeois, who attended and preached a homily at the ordination of Roman Catholic Womanpriest Janice Sevre-Duszynska in August, 2008, was notified by the same congregation shortly after that event that he had incurred a *latae sententiae*, or automatic, excommunication for his participation.

The letter references that event and says Bourgeois? continued support of women?s ordination since -- specifically mentioning his Feb. 12 participation as a panel speaker at a showing of the film *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican* -- has been ?in disobedience to the explicit instructions of your Superiors.?

If Bourgeois does not respond with 15 days, the letter says he will be given a second warning, after which the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers will dismiss him for ?publicly reject[ing] the teaching of the Holy Father.?

In an e-mailed statement this afternoon, Dougherty told *NCR* that Maryknoll is ?very saddened? by the turn of events.

?We have stood by Roy during this difficult time for him and his church, and we remain hopeful that the issues separating them can be reconciled.?

Speaking to *NCR* this morning, Bourgeois, who has been a member of Maryknoll for 44 years and a priest for 38, said that while the letter bought about ?great sadness,? he does not plan to recant his support.

?We state that the call to be a priest is a gift and comes from God,? said Bourgeois. ?How can we as men say our call from God is authentic, but your call as women is not? Who are we to reject God?s call of women to the priesthood??

Ladislas Orsy, a canon lawyer at Georgetown University, told *NCR* that once Bourgeois is laicized by the Vatican congregation there would be no recourse for reconsideration of his case, barring intervention from Pope Benedict XVI.

SOA Watch, which calls attention to the training of soldiers from Latin America at what used to be called the School of the Americas and is now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, located at Fort Benning, Ga., said Maryknoll?s move will not impact Bourgeois? role in the organization.

?Fr. Roy is the founder of School of the Americas Watch and he will be a part of the movement and he will be involved in the movement even if Maryknoll is going to follow through with this,? said Henrik Voss, SOA Watch?s national organizer.

Suzanne Thiel, administrator of the western region of the United States for Roman Catholic Women Priests USA, told *NCR* that she sent an e-mail to the network asking people to contact the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers on Bourgeois? behalf.

Eileen DiFranco, administrator of the eastern region of Roman Catholic Women Priests USA, said Bourgeois? continued support of women?s ordination has been unique among priests and ?represents what a priest should be.?

?Roy is the only person who had courage [to speak publicly]? said DiFranco. ?There are other people who have privately supported women?s ordination. Roy went public and obviously he?s risked his entire life.?

With days to respond to the letter from the order he?s served most of his adult life, Bourgeois, who was born in 1938, said the pushback he?s experienced from his support of women?s ordination has given him a ?real understanding? of ?what it means to be a priest.?

?I believe if we really take our faith seriously on these issues of justice and peace, there?s going to be consequences,? said Bourgeois. ?I must say I?m just seeing now...that maybe I?m finally becoming a faithful priest. I finally really understand what this man Jesus was talking about when he said it?s not going to be easy.?

A copy of the letter to Bourgeois from his supeiriors is here: First Canonical Warning [1].

Editor's Note: The original version of this story incorrectly stated the amount of time Bourgeois has to respond to the letter from Maryknoll Superior General Fr. Edward Dougherty. The letter gives Bourgeois 15 days to respond, starting from the day of its receipt.

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