

Bourgeois' dismissal came after two years of dialog, says Maryknoll

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 30, 2011

Roy Bourgeois



Maryknoll Father Edward M. Dougherty is seen in this file photo of a Nov. 25, 2008, Mass during which he was installed as the superior general for Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. (CNS photo/Octavio Duran)

The decision to threaten Fr. Roy Bourgeois with dismissal from Maryknoll, and subsequent laicization by the Vatican, came about after two and a half years of lengthy dialog between the SOA Watch founder and his order, say Bourgeois and Maryknoll superior general Fr. Edward Dougherty.

Bourgeois, a longtime peace activist, yesterday received a letter dated March 18 notifying him of possible dismissal from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. It gives him 15 days to "publicly recant" his support of women's ordination before the order will forward his case to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith "with a request for laicization."

Speaking to *NCR* by phone immediately after receiving the letter yesterday, Bourgeois said he had been in several meetings with Dougherty over the past two and a half years, with the last coming at the Maryknoll offices in New York the same day the dismissal letter is dated.

While Bourgeois said he told Dougherty he could not, "in good conscience," recant his support of women's ordination at their last meeting, the peace activist said he tried to recognize in their discussion that "we are all in different places."

"I began the meeting by saying I do apologize for any problems I might be causing Maryknoll because of this issue," said Bourgeois. "I wish I could follow my conscience, follow my faith, and not be upsetting to you...But I just don't know how that's possible."

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

In an e-mailed statement to *NCR* yesterday, Dougherty said the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers had given Bourgeois "a number of opportunities to openly communicate with the Vatican and move out from under his excommunication from the church."

In a phone conversation this morning, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers' public relations manager, Mike Virgintino, said that while the order tried to advise Bourgeois that his endorsement of women's ordination was a "serious matter," "the society as a whole...supports Roy" though not his stance on the issue.

"He's one of them," said Virgintino. "They understand his opinion and his views, but they also understand that they as a society must follow the doctrines of the church."

Virgintino also said the society had wished to keep their dialog with Bourgeois "between Roy and his church," but the priest "decided to make this a public issue."

"The society wished that they could have helped Roy reconcile this situation," he said. "Obviously, he does not wish to and there's nothing more that the Maryknoll society can do at this point."

News of Bourgeois' warning letter from Maryknoll spurred several progressive Catholic organizations to issue calls of support for the activist priest yesterday afternoon.

Call to Action invited its members to sign an online petition in support of Bourgeois and released a statement on their Web site from executive director Jim FitzGerald calling Bourgeois' possible expulsion from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers a "threat to all Catholics who believe that women and men are created equally."

"We urge Maryknoll leadership to also stand in solidarity with their brother, Roy, and with Catholics across the globe who know that a church with women and men as equals makes for a better church," wrote FitzGerald.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests, the organization to which Sevre-Duszynska belongs, said in a press release they "urge all people of good will" to stand behind Bourgeois, who they consider "a true champion of peace and justice."



Bourgeois refused to be cowed by men who support an unjust law that knowingly and persistently discriminates against half of the Body of Christ. Father Roy has acted as a true Imago Dei by speaking truth to power, regardless of the consequences. He has seen the face of Jesus in his sisters," said Eileen DiFranco, administrator of the eastern region of Roman Catholic Women Priests USA in the release.

The Women's Ordination Conference, which calls itself "the oldest and largest national organization that works to ordain women as priests, deacons and bishops," also issued a notice calling for supporters to sign a petition and to consider placing postcards supporting women's ordination in the collection baskets at Masses this week.

In the coming days, Bourgeois said he will be working on a letter to the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Vatican explaining his view. He also said he plans to consult with canon lawyers about his options.

In their continued talks over his status with the order, Bourgeois said he had hoped the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers would be open to having a "civil discourse" about women's ordination.

"Maryknoll is so well known for its work for justice. I was hoping they would see this issue as for what it is, a justice issue," said Bourgeois. "I would have liked to have seen Maryknoll participate in the international dialog that's going on around this issue."

No matter the outcome with his order, Bourgeois said he "will continue full time" with 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.

Asked what a laicized life might look like for him, Bourgeois remembered his ordination day and the phrase that adorned the cards he sent out to friends over three decades ago, explaining his new role as a member of the clergy: "Thou art a priest forever."

"I just feel they can excommunicate me, they can kick me out of Maryknoll, but in my heart I feel I will still be a priest," said Bourgeois. "How can they strip that of you? Sure it's going to be very painful not to be able to live out my ministry openly -- saying Mass, baptizing babies, preaching. That's of the past and that will be very painful, but in my heart I feel they cannot strip me of what was said 38 years ago."

Pope Benedict approved a set of revisions to canon law last year that listed the "attempted ordination" of women as one of several offences considered a "grave crime" and subject to the jurisdiction of the congregation. The new language says that both the woman being ordained and "the one who attempts to confer sacred ordination" to her are automatically excommunicated.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

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