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Father's blessing brings peace to Roy Bourgeois

by Tom Roberts



In his own words, Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois has "poked at a lot of

hornets nests" along the way from soldier in Vietnam to committed pacifist and persistent critic of U.S. military policy. He's poked at the presumptions of major institutions and systems, including, most recently, standing in opposition to the Catholic church's ban on ordaining women.

But for all of the heat he's taken, for all of the scary episodes that come with bucking the status quo, one of the most emotionally wrenching moments of his life occurred just days ago in the living room of his childhood home.

There he stood, with his sisters, Ann and Janet, and his brother, Dan. They had read his response to the Vatican's threat of excommunication if he did not recant his position supporting women's ordination. In it he had said he could no more rescind his position on ordination of women than he could recant his opposition to the training of foreign troops at what was once called the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., or his opposition to the war in Iraq.

So they all knew that his 36-year career as a priest was probably nearing an end, that after 36 years of service, work among the poor and against military violence, he would be ostracized, no longer considered

a part of the church community.

They waited now to hear what 95-year-old Roy Sr., devout Catholic and daily Mass attendee, would say about this latest in a long history of controversies involving his son.

“My siblings were afraid this would break his heart. My sister Ann was the first to ask him, “Daddy, how do you feel about this?” Bourgeois recalled in a Nov. 17 phone interview. “My dad cried. He’s a soft-hearted guy. But then he got his composure and said: “God brought Roy back from the war in Vietnam. God took care of Roy in his mission work in Bolivia and El Salvador, and God is going to take care of Roy now.” Then he said, “Roy is doing the right thing by following his conscience, and I support him.”

They all wept, said Bourgeois. It was curious, he said, because all of them had worried that the news would be terribly upsetting to his father. “But then this person of great inner strength looked at us and said, “God will look after the family, too.”

Bourgeois, who faces almost certain excommunication, was the founder of an annual protest outside the gates of Fort Benning and what once was called the School of the Americas. This year’s protest will be held Nov. 21-23. The school’s name was changed in recent years to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

As the School of the Americas, the facility trained scores of Latin American military who can be traced to committing or overseeing some of the most horrendous human rights abuses in modern Latin American history. Troops engaged in assassinations, disappearances, torture and massacres of hundreds of thousands throughout the region. Some of the most heinous crimes occurred in El Salvador and Guatemala during periods of civil war there in the latter part of the 20th century.

Bourgeois is known primarily for his campaign against the School of the Americas and opposition to the war in Iraq as well as his advocacy of the story of Franz Jagerstatter, the Austrian farmer who was executed for refusing induction into the German military during World War II.

Increasingly in recent years, however, he has become a vocal critic of the church’s ban on women’s ordination. He said he kept meeting women who said they had a call from God for ordination. “Who are we, as men, to say their call is illegitimate,” he regularly asked.

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For Bourgeois, the issue was a matter of justice, and he reached a point this past summer when he could no longer remain on the sidelines. Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a regular protester at the School of the Americas, asked Bourgeois to attend her ordination Aug. 9 in Lexington, Ky. She became the sixth woman to be ordained in the United States this year as part of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement.

The Vatican response arrived Oct. 21, threatening excommunication unless Bourgeois recanted his statements saying the church is wrong and unjust in maintaining the ban.

When he received the letter, Bourgeois, canceled all plans. He travels widely, giving talks and consulting with representatives of Latin American governments to persuade them to stop sending soldiers to the United States for training.

He decided to go into solitude for two weeks to meditate and pray and to work on his response to the

Vatican. He completed the response Nov. 7, mailed it and headed off on a seven-hour drive to his childhood home in tiny Litcher, La., where his father still lives.

He had arranged a meeting with his siblings and his father. His sisters, especially, were fearful about what the news would do to his father.

“When I received his blessing and the blessing of my family, I felt a great peace. A total peace came over me. And I’ve felt peaceful ever since I came back from Louisiana.” Nothing the Vatican does, he said, can take that peace and serenity away.

Still, he prepares for a lonely move into the unknown. Fellow priests have called and written to voice their agreement and support, but all of them say they can’t do it publicly because it would jeopardize their ministries and positions within the church. He doesn’t know what kind of association, if any, he’ll be able to maintain with Maryknoll in the future.

Bourgeois expects a final word from Rome soon. His deadline to recant is Nov. 21.

Betsy Guest, Maryknoll spokesperson, said the society was led to believe that a response will be made Nov. 24. She said that unless Rome levies further penalties, such as revoking Bourgeois’ membership in the society, he can remain a member of Maryknoll, though he will be unable to function as a priest. He hopes that when the final word comes he would be given the courtesy of 15-minute visits with Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal William Levada, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican office that issued the warning of excommunication.

“I am not angry,” said Bourgeois, who acknowledged early on that his attendance at the ordination could have serious consequences. “I don’t want to respond in anger. I would like to meet with them personally to explain my position and make my appeal.”

Tom Roberts is NCR editor at large.

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