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Priests' letter supports Bourgeois

Zoe Ryan | Aug. 1, 2011

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Bourgeois demonstrates outside a congressional office building in Washington in this April 26, 2007, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

A group of "priests in good standing within the Roman Catholic church" wrote to Maryknoll superiors last month to support the priesthood of Fr. Roy Bourgeois "and his right to speak from his conscience." The letter bore the signatures of 157 priests.

Bourgeois, 73, has been threatened with dismissal from Maryknoll, a New York-based missionary order, for his public support of women's ordination and participation in such events.

"The priests felt the need to stand in support of, not only Fr. Bourgeois, but their own right to speak from their conscience," the July 21 letter said.

The letter is addressed to Fr. Edward Dougherty, superior general of Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

"While we understand the difficulty of your position we hope that seeing support of ordained priests in good standing will help you come to a fair and just conclusion," the letter said.

The letter does not specifically address the issue of women's ordination, only that the signees support the right to speak from conscience. The letter and the signatures have not been made public, but *NCR* obtained a copy of the letter with the names.

The letter is "an attempt to let the superior general of Maryknoll and Vatican officials know that priests in the United States really support Fr. Roy Bourgeois and feel that his right to speak from his conscience is certainly something that is justified," said the spokesman for the statement, Fr. Fred Daley of Syracuse, N.Y.

There is "certainly a concern, too, that we're moving into a situation where it's a church of fear rather than a church of love," Daley said. The signees were a mix of diocesan priests and order priests, he said.

Maryknoll's spokesman, Mike Virgintino, confirmed to *NCR* that the order had received the letter and that it "acknowledges" the right of Bourgeois and anyone in the Catholic church to present their views and speak from their conscience on any issues.

He said that this is an ongoing situation between Bourgeois and the church, not between Bourgeois and Maryknoll.

Daley said that the letter was addressed to Dougherty because as the superior general of Maryknoll he is the one who will be doing the removing.

Other letters in support of Bourgeois have been sent to Maryknoll or the Vatican, but no letter or statement has had so many priests sign onto it.

"It's sad that someone who has given [his] whole life to the church and has witnessed for peace and accompanied the poor is being treated in such an embarrassingly scandalous way," said Daley, a friend of Bourgeois.

According to Daley, in early July a group of concerned priests began talking about a way to support Bourgeois and the idea of a letter emerged. The group approached Call to Action, a Chicago-based church-reform organization, for help in reaching out to other priests. Bourgeois was notified of the letter while it was being created, Daley said.

In other parts of the world, priests have been banding together as a united front for the rights of Catholics. The National Council of Priests of Australia has defended ousted Toowoomba Bishop William Morris. In Ireland, the Association of Catholic Priests formed last year to represent Irish clergy and promote a reform agenda, including a reevaluation of the church's teaching on sexuality and the inclusion of women at every level within the church. And last month in Austria, 300 priests signed a letter calling for reform, including ordaining woman and married priests.

In March, Dougherty and Maryknoll secretary general Fr. Edward McGovern wrote Bourgeois telling him that he had 15 days to "publicly recant" his support of women's ordination or face dismissal from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

After 15 days, a second letter would be sent, and if Bourgeois did not recant after that, Maryknoll would send his dismissal records to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "for confirmation with a request for laicization."

Bourgeois responded in a letter dated April 8, stating that he could not recant without betraying his conscience.

To date, Bourgeois has not received the second letter from Maryknoll.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent a letter to Bourgeois in 2008 ordering him to stop his public support of women's ordination and not to participate in events related to it, but Bourgeois did not adhere to those demands.

Bourgeois is also the founder of SOA Watch, an organization seeking to close down the former School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, a U.S. Army school that trains soldiers and military personnel from Latin America.

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