

Support, criticism swirl around Bourgeois

Tom Roberts | Nov. 20, 2008



Letters, petitions go to Rome about priest threatened with excommunication

The news that peace activist Fr. Roy Bourgeois was threatened with excommunication for his support of women's ordination unleashed a storm of commentary and reaction from various Catholic interest groups and around the blogosphere.

If the issue is settled for Rome, it is still wide open in some Catholic circles. In addition to the expected sharp division between those who applaud Bourgeois' action and those who find it scandalous, people have posed thoughtful questions about conscience, and how and whether the church can force someone to violate his conscience. Others, in what amounts to a fairly robust discussion of the question of women's ordination, raise issues of history and women's place in the early church based on an understanding of scripture and archaeological evidence.

Another thread that runs through much of the commentary asks how the church could act so swiftly against Bourgeois when decades passed before the church even began to investigate cases of sex abuse of children by priests. Meanwhile, Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest of 36 years, is trying to meld issues that normally operate in separate spheres by claiming that the ban on ordaining women is as serious an injustice within the church as the injustices he has confronted in the realms of the political and military.

Bourgeois, who concelebrated an ordination of women in Kentucky in August, responded to the Vatican's

warning that he recant his position or face excommunication with a letter stating that he considered the ban on ordination of women an injustice within the church and that he could not recant what he considered a matter of conscience.

He expects to receive final notice of excommunication from the Vatican in the very near future.

On Amy Goodman's news program Democracy Now! Nov. 20, Bourgeois said he wanted to go to Rome. "I will be going to Rome. A number of fellow priests have already asked me, said they would like to join me, along with a bishop friend. We will be going to Rome to appeal this. I would want to have, and I think I have a right to -- and it's reasonable to request, after 36 years as a priest, a short meeting with Pope Benedict and other leaders in the Church to appeal my case, to simply appeal to them personally and say what I said in my letter to them that this cannot be justified."

In a homily delivered during the August ordination, Bourgeois declared, "Just as soldiers in Latin America abuse their power and control others, it saddens me to see the hierarchy of our church abusing their power and causing so much suffering among women. Jesus was a healer, a peacemaker, who called everyone into the circle as equals."

Roman Catholic Womenpriests, who sponsored the ordination that precipitated the Vatican action against Bourgeois, asked in a release how the Vatican could "excommunicate women who honor their call to the priesthood and, in the case of Fr. Roy, the men who support them, but not the priests and bishops who have perpetrated sexual abuse of children?"

In a series of questions, the group also asked why the Vatican continued to ignore "the voice of the community," citing surveys that regularly show a heavy majority of Catholics would approve of women priests.

"Why do you continue to deny the documented archaeological evidence that supports the spiritual leadership of women as deaconesses, priests and bishops for the first 1200 years of church history?" the group asked.

One of the most high profile clerics to weigh in on the Vatican discipline is Jesuit Fr. James Martin, an author and frequent contributor to *America* magazine, the weekly Jesuit publication. In a Nov. 11 blog posting, Martin essentially explained the collision course that was inevitable when Bourgeois clearly violated church teaching by participating in the ordination, no matter that on another level, he was following his conscience, an inviolable activity. Martin cites several of the powerful references to conscience in Vatican II documents and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, including the line from *Gaudium et Spes*: "Conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

Martin tacks a "reflection" to the end of his entry in which he recounts that the excommunication warning was sent to Bourgeois in October, within three months of the ordination ceremony in August. "Would that the church had acted with equal swiftness against sexually abusive priests. Would that bishops who had moved abusive priests from parish to parish were met with the same severity of justice.

"Were their offenses of lesser gravity?" he asked. "Did they cause lesser scandal?"

Many people spoke of writing to Pope Benedict XVI as well as Cardinal William Levada, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican agency that corresponded with Bourgeois.

One long missive that was sent to both the pope and *NCR* was from Charlotte Therese of Sweden. Near the end of the letter, she states:

"I've studied all the arguments against women ordinations in detail and I've found that none of them is solid

enough to build any teachings upon. It's rather the opposite way -- they all fall down like a pile of cards if they're slightly touched. I thus hope you will welcome and reopen theological discussions about this in the Vatican, through inviting theologians from all over the world who has (sic) studied the question at depth -- both women and men -- and both those who based on their studies are positive to change and those who aren't, and they should all have the right to speak and vote.?

A respondent on one blog who said he accepts 'the stand of those in charge at this time' opposed the action against Bourgeois. 'Instead of refuting Fr. Roy's position, they silence his voice. What does this accomplish? Have those in charge not learned the lessons of history?'

Call to Action, the lay reform group that has long supported women's ordination, was attempting to gather 2,000 signatures on a petition supporting Bourgeois prior to this year's demonstration at Ft. Benning, Ga.

Bourgeois was founder of the annual event, which attracts thousands and is referred to as SOA Watch after the School of the Americas, the former name of the school at the fort. It was changed in 2001 to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. The protest began in 1990, a year after six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were assassinated in El Salvador by troops that had been trained at the SOA.

On Nov. 20, Bourgeois was preparing for the crowds that were beginning to arrive. Asked in a phone interview about reactions to his impending excommunication, he said he continues to receive calls of support, but said he had heard nothing further from the Vatican.

As for the SOA protest, Bourgeois said happily that he was finished with his organizational duties. He said he was in charge of arranging for portable potties and had just met the crew that delivered them. 'I'm finished for the weekend. My work is done. And it's one of the most important jobs here,' he joked.

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- [Bourgeois participates in women's ordination ceremony.](#) [2]
- [Bourgeois homily: 'Conscience compels us to be here today'](#) [3]

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