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127 former Maryknollers support Bourgeois

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 10, 2011
Roy Bourgeois

Like Fr. Roy Bourgeois, many of them supported the ministries of Maryknoll around the world as missionaries, priests, or sisters.

Now, as the priest faces expulsion from the missionary order for his backing of women's ordination, they're publicly supporting him.

Writing that they have experienced "sadness and regret" since the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers announced its move against Bourgeois in March, 127 people with close ties to the order have written to Bourgeois expressing support -- telling the priest that his superiors possess "neither the courage, nor the wisdom, nor the requisite diplomacy to affirm you and your prophetic ministry."

The letter, which was released Oct. 6 as the order was celebrating its 100th anniversary with a symposium at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, is signed by people from across the country who served with Maryknoll in some capacity over the years. Among those listed as signers are a number of former priests, and three people still living abroad, in Peru, Bolivia, and Armenia.

"How unfortunate...that you are accused of giving scandal to 'the people of God' and the church," the writers say to Bourgeois. "And how ironic, when indeed it is the Vatican and the [Maryknoll] General Council who are causing the scandal across America and the world by punishing you in a manner that underscores the Vatican?s longstanding negative attitude toward women."

Maryknoll Superior General Edward Dougherty warned Bourgeois in a July 27 letter that he would face expulsion from the order if he continued his ?campaign in favor of women priests and failed to recant publicly your position on the matter.? Bourgeois, who participated in a 2008 women's ordination ceremony, has contracted Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, a noted canon lawyer, to fight the expulsion on the grounds of primacy of conscience.

"We see your conscience as alive and well, active and clear, and guided by the Spirit," the letter writers tell Bourgeois. "You have nothing to recant. Let Holy Mother Church recant, as it did in the case of Galileo, as it did in the case of Joan of Arc and as it did in the case of Limbo, which brought untold suffering to mothers, fathers and families for centuries."

In a phone interview this morning, one of the organizers of the letter of support said that, as people with ties to Maryknoll, many of the signers felt they "just had to say something" about Bourgeois' expulsion.

"We all know him and we all feel badly that he's been treated so badly," said Gregory Orienzo, a therapist who served as priest with Maryknoll in Peru from 1958-70 and helped organize the writing of the letter.

In an e-mail this afternoon, Mike Virgintino, the manager of communications for the Maryknoll Fathers and

Brothers, said that while the society recognized in their dealings with Bourgeois that the matter between him and the church "required a thoughtful approach," they "decided it was necessary for Father Bourgeois to engage in communication with his church to discuss the issues that separate them."

Said Virgintino: "Maryknoll wishes that more Catholics would understand that it is Maryknoll that has tried to open the doors of dialogue for Father Bourgeois over these three years and that it is Maryknoll that will continue to befriend him as part of its extended family no matter his decision or the decision of the Church."

The letter of support, Orienzo said, began about three months ago as a discussion on an email listserv between former Maryknoll missionaries on Bourgeois' expulsion. After a back and forth conversation, they decided to draft a letter in support.

Asked whether the former Maryknollers had considered whether Bourgeois' support for women priests might endanger the order's missionaries around the world who depend on the global church's support of the order, Orienzo said many people he'd talked to in ministry with Maryknoll also expressed support for Bourgeois.

"There's a groundswell around the world for women priests," he said. "I think if they had defended Bourgeois, people would have been proud and happy that Maryknoll had defended one of their guys."

The Women's Ordination Conference, which has also supported Bourgeois, announced this afternoon that they will hand-deliver a petition signed by some 15,000 people in support of the priest to the Vatican Oct. 17.

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Editor's Note: For the full text of the letter in support of Bourgeois, **click here** [1].

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