NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

SOA vigil ends with parting Bourgeois thoughts

Patrick O'Neill | Nov. 24, 2008

Fr. Roy Bourgeois has had his share of troubles with authority figures. The 69-year-old Maryknoll priest has spent about four years in jail and prison for acts of civil disobedience; he has been kicked out of Latin American countries for his rabble rousing on behalf of the poor, and he once called for the ordination of women while a guest on Vatican radio.

Even Bourgeois admits, however, he wasn?t expecting the international firestorm his latest run in with the Catholic hierarchy has stirred up. Last August, Bourgeois preached at the ordination of a Catholic woman priest. In October, he received a letter from the Vatican ordering him to recant his support for women?s ordination or face excommunication.

?This is the biggest beehive I?ve ever poked, the patriarchal beehive,? Bourgeois said Sunday just minutes after the final curtain was lowered at the 19th annual School of the Americas Watch weekend of protests outside the south gate of Army Post Ft. Benning. ?And those bees in Rome, they are angry.

?It?s bigger than the beehive we poked here years ago,? Bourgeois said as he gestured with his hand toward the Ft. Benning gate just 30 yards away. ?We got resistance and (the Army) wanted to sting us, but nothing like this.?

His ?dark night of the soul? past, Bourgeois says he?ll likely be sad again this week when, as expected, he receives an official notification of excommunication from Rome.

Rather than dour and despondent as he faces what will likely be the premature end to his 36-year priesthood, Bourgeois, who is also a Vietnam War ve teran, spent much of the SOA Watch weekend getting hugs and handshakes from well-wishers who assured him that he is a priest forever in their eyes.

?When I got the letter I was weak, nauseous; this is serious,? Bourgeois told NCR. For two weeks, Bourgeois prepared his unrepentant response to Rome, enduring sleepless nights -- ?I mean dark nights of the soul, because I was beginning to see the consequences,? he said. ?I knew I could not recant, and what I also knew is that there was a possibility I would really hurt loved ones, especially my father.?

After heading home to Louisiana to tell his family the news, Bourgeois was comforted when his 95-year-old father hugged him and said: ?Look, God brought Roy back from the war in Vietnam; God took care of Roy in his mission work in Bolivia and El Salvador. God?s going to take care of Roy now. Roy?s doing the right thing and I support him.?

A hug from his father was all the blessing Bourgeois needed. ?And I wept,? he said. ?Those were tears of joy.?

His return trip to Columbus was peaceful. ?I have such peace, inner peace, such joy in my heart and I know there?s nothing that Rome can do to me to take away that peace I feel. I?ve got the blessing and the support of my daddy in Louisiana. ... I feel that I want, but I?m not concerned about the blessings of the Pope in Rome. My

dad?s blessing is what?s important to me.?

When his friend, and former SOA Watch ?prisoner of conscience? Janice Sevre-Duszynska invited Bourgeois to preach at her Aug. 9 ordination, Bourgeois happily accepted, a decision he says he does not regret.

?When I got the invitation, first of all I felt honored to be asked,? he said. ?I just didn?t start talking about this. Even before I started talking about the injustice of the SOA, long before that I was talking in different ways, in homilies, on Vatican Radio more recently, but talking about the injustice of not allowing women to be ordained in the Catholic church. So this is not a new issue to me. So when I got her invitation it was very clear that I had to be there.8 0

Still, Bourgeois didn?t expect the canonical death penalty.

?I knew (excommunication) was a possibility, but I thought it would be a canonical warning,? he said. ?The most severe I thought might be a suspension. ... I love my church. I?m happy in my ministry. It?s gonna be very painful not to be able to celebrate Mass, not to go home and baptize all these little babies, to do the weddings of my nieces and nephews, not to be able to speak at Catholic churches. There is some pain, and I know it?s going to be very painful when I get the official word, when Maryknoll tells me. You see my 30 days were up Friday. And when I get the official letter it?s going to be a shock. I mean when the reality sets in.

?But even deeper than the sorrow, the pain, is that peace, that inner peace knowing that I did the right thing. I followed my conscience; I followed my God. When we do that we can?t go wrong.?

His Church?s silence for years as sexual abuses by priests raged and were covered up in the US, is not lost on Bourgeois. ?NCR reported the sexual abuse crisis starting in the mid 1980s, and it wasn?t until more than 15 years later that Rome intervened and got serious about it. It took the Vatican less than three months to send that letter to me.

?I did not realize that sexism went so deep. There is in many a deep hatred of women, or maybe a threat, they see women more of a threat to power, to the all-boys club. ... They wanted to send a message to fellow clergy, ?If you do what Roy did, you are going to get the same thing: excommunicated.?

?I feel this is a grave injustice being done to me, to women, really this is about women. I?m just lending, joining my voice to theirs.?

At the gathering, Bourgeois said he was humbled by the outpouring of support he received. ?So many of the young people who make up the majority of the thousands here, especially the young women from the colleges and high schools, many of them in the Catholic Schools, came up and said, ?Thank you for speaking out for us.?

?I knew there would be some support because it?s a situation of injustice and it connects to the injustice of the SOA, the war in Iraq. But I did not realize how much support there was for the ordination of women in the Church. We are not a minority.?

Thousands of priests, ?who committed crimes against children and the many bishops aware of their crimes who were silent, are not excommunicated," Bourgeois said. ?Yet Janice, 36 women ordained in this country, all of the women of Europe, Australia who feel called by God -- and they are called by God to priesthood; they love their church; they want to serve their church -- they are excommunicated.?

While he appreciates the ?quiet support? he has received from fellow priests, Bourgeois said he?s baffled that no priests have responded to his letter asking for public support.

"So many priests, Jesuits, Maryknolls, Franciscans, Dominicans, they say this in different ways: ?I support you Roy, 100 percent. Women should be ordained. There?s no justification scripturally, theologically, that should preclude women from ordination, but what you have said publicly I only say in private with trusted friends. I am afraid to speak out. I am fearful.?

?And I got to thinking about that. Our Church is rooted in fear when it should be rooted in love. Who have we become where in the Christian community, in the church, in the community of believers, our fear transcends the love? It?s really sad.?

Bourgeois says he?s pleased that his public stand had inspired much dialogue about gender issues in the Church. His nieces and nephews are asking questions. The Jesuit college students who flock to the SO AW events are asking questions. Bourgeois said he hopes the dialogue will expand to Jesuit priests, and college faculty and presidents.

Bourgeois said he also thinks a church with more women among its leadership would be a better church.

?If we had women priests (the SOA) would have been shut down,? he said. ?If we had women priests and bishops, that war in Iraq would not have gotten all that support. If we had women bishops, women priests, there would not have been the silence all those years about the sexual abuse.?

Source URL (retrieved on *07/24/2014 - 11:20*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/soa-vigil-ends-parting-bourgeois-thoughts