

Roy Bourgeois support everywhere at SOA

Patrick O'Neill | Nov. 26, 2008

COLUMBUS, GA

Genevieve Mougey will graduate next May with a theology degree from St. John's University in Collegeville, MN. While the 31-year says she doesn't wish to be a priest, she does wish her Church at least offered women a place at the Eucharistic table.

"I myself don't feel a call to ordained ministry, but it will be a difficult day, when I have a daughter, to tell her that, "You can do anything in this world except be an ordained member of our faith community."

Mougey made her comments following the traditional Saturday Jesuit vigil mass that drew more than 3,000 worshippers at last weekend's SOA Watch events.

In the 19 years SOAW has been holding its annual fall event near Ft. Benning, women's ordination has often been among the wide array of social justice topics addressed through the offering of workshops and/or petitions.

Last week, however, women's ordination was front and center at this largely Catholic gathering after SOAW founder, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, MM, was notified by the Vatican that he faces likely excommunication after he preached at the Aug. 9 Catholic ordination of Janice Sevre-Duszynska. Bourgeois refused a Vatican order to recant his support for women's ordination.

In Columbus, support for Bourgeois ran high, although some activists worried about how the consequences of excommunication will effect the large movement Bourgeois has built to close the Latin American soldier training school now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Many graduates of the school have been implicated in human rights violations and killings in their native countries.

Like most Catholic women interviewed for this story, Mougey views the cause of women's ordination as a justice issue, and Bourgeois' stance as "a prophetic call that we've heard before and will continue to hear. I think what's important to remember is that we are all one body as we were singing in Mass, in liturgy, and we don't stand alone, and we stand in solidarity on issues of Latin America, on issues of racism and sexism."

Mougey said the Vatican's reaction to Bourgeois was wrong. "It's sad that we continue as a Church body to resort to tactics of breaking apart the Body of Christ.

"I think that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, and I do believe that (woman's ordination) is something that we will see."

Also on Saturday night, Bourgeois was invited to tell his story to a gathering of the Maryknoll family, which included religious and lay missionaries associated with the Ossining, NY-based community who traveled from throughout the country for the SOAW event.

Longtime Maryknoll magazine editor Frank Moravich, 80, said Bourgeois received a standing ovation from the group.

Bourgeois told those gathered that his public stance in support of women's ordination is merely a continuation of his outspokenness against injustice, that he was following his conscience, Moravich said.

"You have to follow your conscience no matter what," said Moravich, who is a longtime friend of Bourgeois. "It's a given. And I think he's following his conscience. He's been a good priest, a Maryknoller for 36 years. He's been dedicated, and he still is committed, still dedicated. I think it's a tragedy. If the Church is really the people of God, how can one person throw somebody out of the Church without consulting the people of God. I think it's an injustice in his case."

Moravich said many individual Maryknoll members support Bourgeois, but the community will not be able to do so officially.

"They know Roy, and they know he is an Israelite," Moravich said. "I think he has the support of his brother Maryknollers."

"For an organization it will have to be tacit support, of course, because the Vatican has a way of getting even with institutions that don't appear loyal. I'm sure he'll have the tacit support of the Maryknoll community because Maryknoll regards itself as a family. It's been supportive of (Maryknoll Fr.) Miguel D'Escoto. Why wouldn't they be supportive of Roy Bourgeois?"

Moravich said the excommunication will likely result in some bishops banning Bourgeois from speaking at Catholic institutions, "but who knows, who knows?"

At the SOAW event, many people refused interview requests about Bourgeois' situation with the Vatican, but Jack McHale, a Pax Christi USA activist from Our Lady Queen of Peace parish in Arlington, VA, said Bourgeois' decision could be a defining moment for both Bourgeois and to those working to close the Army school.

"I really hope Roy knows what he's doing," McHale said. "One of the issues here is what it does potentially to closing the School of the Americas and his movement that he really has ignited."

"This to me is without a doubt one of the most important decisions he's making. It may be the right decision, but I hope he weighed all that in making this move, I really do."

Sr. Elizabeth Sully, 71, a Simsimawa Dominican and artist in Atlanta, marched Sunday with a group of women, several of whom were wearing hand-lettered placards stating: "Dominicans for Women's Ordination."

The women pointed to Sully as their spokeswoman. Sully said she felt "a great sadness" about Bourgeois' plight.

"Patriarchy has been with us for the last 5,000 years and continues on to this day, and how do we begin to recognize the violence that surrounded all of that?" Sully asked.

Sully said she feels "tremendous gratitude and respect" for the work Bourgeois has done. "He's taken a stand and offered the leadership we've needed especially in this country."

Sully said Bourgeois' effort to close the Army school and his stance for women's ordination are related issues.

"It's all one, because it's all about violence," she said. "Every violence connects up with every other violence."

Sully noted the irony that Bourgeois, a man, is at the center of the controversy about a women's issue.

"I suppose there is irony in it," Sully said. "The women have been pushing it, but often it's the man's voice that gets heard. Maybe it's logical this happened this way."

Regarding his pending excommunication, Sully was blunt: "Maybe that's the price of justice."

Canadian and former priest Dwyer Sullivan, who teaches high school- and college-age Catholic youth, said the young people he meets do not understand the Church's prohibition against women priests or the Vatican's harsh reaction to Bourgeois.

"The Church is so slow to move, and it's such an obvious need," he said.

Sullivan said he was very disappointed when the Canadian Catholic Church welcomed many married Anglican priests who "were fleeing women priesthood" to enter the Catholic priesthood, while former priests like himself are denied.

"We're talking about the dignity of people here," he said. "We're not recognizing as a Church more than half the people in our community."

Bourgeois may have gotten in over his head when he preached at the ordination, but that is how Bourgeois lives his life, Sullivan said.

"I think he was, I won't say backed into it, but his whole life has been a commitment to justice," he said. "The fact that the Church doesn't allow dissent hardly is in keeping with Jesus' message of being out in the open, encouraging discussion. It's a very sad day."

To Sullivan, allowing women priests would be a practical solution in a North American church that is in great need of vocations.

"The universal Church may have vocations elsewhere, but in North America, priests are in short supply," Sullivan said. "In North America, young people see the exclusion of women and gays as unacceptable. Young people are going to leave the Church to follow Jesus' message. It's a shame that we're caught in institutionalism."

Bourgeois is being excommunicated "because he has a belief based on Gospel teachings to respect all people," Sullivan said.

SOA Watch staffer Eric LeCompte said Bourgeois' actions just continue his life work of challenging the Church to be just.

"Roy has always spoken out for justice in our Church, and I think for us as a movement, just as we're calling for accountability within our government, we need to call for accountability within our Church, so I think we would be hypocritical if we weren't calling for change in the Church as we're calling for it in our government," LeCompte said.

"This weekend we found that there was a lot of support for what Roy did. On Saturday, line after line of people came up to him. Roy couldn't leave for five hours from behind he stage because so many people wanted to share their support for the courageous action that he took."

St. Louis University social work and public health graduate student Sarah Holland said Bourgeois is an inspiration to her because he's willing to ask the difficult questions.

"I think he's continuing that with what's going on right now, and we all mourn for him and his loss. I think it's

all of our loss," Holland said.

Holland, 26, who has been to the SOAW gathering three times, said Bourgeois' stance on women's ordination will not be understood by everyone.

"Now, the movement will forever be connected with another issue that's very divisive, and good or bad, it's going to force a lot of people aligned with the (SOAW) movement to question their involvement, and I think that's unfortunate," she said. "But I respect the fact that he's doing what he believes in, and he's standing by it. I think we all should."

Erich Sekel, assistant director of campus ministry at St. Peter Prep in Jersey City, NJ, said Bourgeois' excommunication could result in his not being allowed to speak in Catholic schools, something Bourgeois does frequently. Still, Sekel supports Bourgeois completely.

"As a campus minister in a Catholic Jesuit high school, it's very difficult to disagree with the Church, but personally, I do not agree with excommunication in this case," Sekel said. "Perhaps the way he went about it was inappropriate, but sometimes you have to do certain things that are rash to gain attention for an issue or a movement.

"I have a lot of family members who I know would be priests immediately if (the Church) allowed women to be priests, so I support the movement for women to become Catholic priests,"

Sekel said Bourgeois' stance might help the SOAW movement. "I don't think it jeopardizes this movement. It actually might bring more attention to it, tough question."

Former Scranton IHM sister Sylvia O'Connor of the Diocese of Raleigh, NC, said Bourgeois "is a sacrificial lamb. I think we have been skirting this issue for a number of years."

O'Connor, who personally thanked Bourgeois for his pro-women's ordination stance, said a monsignor told her that Pope John Paul II had spoken infallibly when he said Catholics should not discuss women's ordination, "which I do not accept," she said. "I am in full support of Fr. Roy."

Many of her former IHM sisters work as pastoral administrators in the Raleigh Diocese, O'Connor said.

"They are the Church to those congregations. They are hearing confessions. They are passing the Eucharist to people. Why should they be denied the fullness of ordination because of their sex?"

While the Church may kick Bourgeois out, Sully, the Dominican sister, said others will find ways to keep Bourgeois in the fold.

"They draw a circle and exclude us. We draw a larger circle and include everyone," Sully said.

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