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

Roy Bourgeois: They finally got him

Tom Roberts | Nov. 20, 2012 NCR Today

Ah, they finally got him, as we all knew they probably would. Eventually. And with a press release it was done: Fr. Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest for 45 years, was told that the Vatican "dispenses" him "from his sacred bonds." [1]

And the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, caught in the culture that finds advocating for women's ordination such a grievous and unpardonable offense, "warmly thanks" Roy "for his service to mission and all members wish him well in his personal life."

And so it goes, as Vonnegut would say. So it goes.

Bourgeois' case is a prime illustration of what, today, the institution can and can't tolerate. Bourgeois' major offense, the sin that is unforgiveable in the eyes of the church, for which penalty is removal from the order which he has served for nearly half a century and dismissal from the community, was advocating for women's ordination.

It's a clear case: the priest attended a woman's ordination ceremony and, as the release noted, his "disobedience and preaching against the teaching of the Catholic Church about women's ordination led to his excommunication, dismissal and laicization."

The three biggies, all at once, all wrapped up in less than four years' time.

In fact, the Vatican reaction initially occurred far more swiftly. Soon after he attended the Womanpriest service in August 2008, Bourgeois received a Vatican notice that he had incurred an automatic, or *latae sententiae*, excommunication.

It took until this year -- with some canonical attempts to save Bourgeois' priestly status -- to finally get rid of him. It was an open-and-shut case. He refused to recant his position.

It was a matter of conscience that he'd arrived at over a long period of time and in conversation with many women who spoke of their calling to priestly vocation. He thought the church should open the question to discussion. The church thought he should be quiet.

There is no room for such discussion. The fear of that discussion is so great that clerics who dare to raise it are dealt with swiftly and severely.

Bourgeois is out. He persisted in what was intolerable.

The point has by now been made by countless readers and others who see the gaping discrepancy in what church leaders finds tolerable and intolerable. But it is worth stating once more, in public and for the record.

Bourgeois spent the first part of his life working with the poor and victimized in Vietnam as a naval officer

there and later, as a priest, with the marginalized in Bolivia and El Salvador.

Still later, he would set up shop in a tiny apartment outside the gates of Fort Benning, Ga., opposing the U.S. School of the Americas (since renamed) and its program of teaching anti-insurgency techniques, including torture, to the militaries of Latin American regimes notorious for horrible human rights abuses.

Bourgeois was not into clerical career advancement. He didn't curry favor with the correct think tanks or develop the proper relationships with the guys in purple and red.

He just did the kinds of things that make people nervous, questioning those otherwise viewed as guarantors of our security, and attracting thousands every year to confess our national sins.

But worst of all, he began speaking to women and he allowed himself to be convinced. They should be permitted to become priests, he said. Not quietly, as do lots of priests and some bishops, but openly. The question of women and their place in the church should be open to discussion, he kept saying.

The Cardinals Who Nearly Destroyed the Church

The point to be made, now that Bourgeois is out, is an obvious one. There are cardinals who have had as much to do as any individual might with the near destruction of once grand Catholic communities in places like Boston and Philadelphia, who have been permitted to remain priests and go quietly into retirement.

Not a word has been said by Rome or by his successors about Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua who had a large space in Philadelphia's chancery office that was filled with files recounting sexual abuse of children.

Bevilacqua oversaw priests who were involved in nothing short of sexual torture of youngsters. And he hid their deeds until the statutes of limitation kicked in and the priests could no longer be prosecuted. They would retire, and he would escape the law and any Vatican sanction until he could retire.

His successor, Cardinal Justin Rigali, ignored the charter that the bishops themselves had been forced to construct in the course of the scandal. He violated the church's rules and likely violated civil law by not reporting alleged abusers. And off he quietly went, as a middle manager in the chancery office headed to jail.

Cardinal Bernard Law, everyone knows, had to leave Boston because of the enormous public pressure and the outrage of his priests, but he took a cushy job in Rome and retained his seats on at least six powerful Vatican congregations, including the Congregation for Bishops, until he was allowed to quietly retire.

In Kansas City, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn, convicted in September of one count of failing to notify police that one of his priests had taken hundreds of lewd photographs of children, is still a bishop.

Finn recently attended a national meeting of bishops, and not one of them publicly raised the issue. The body of bishops, which has repeatedly apologized for unspecified "mistakes" in the handling of the abuse crisis and repeatedly promised transparency and accountability, couldn't bring itself to mention the glaring contradiction and hypocrisy in its midst.

Not a word from the Vatican. Not a word from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the conference. All were silent. And not a word from Finn about the damage and expense he has already cost the diocese.

What's glaringly clear is what's tolerable and what's not tolerable to the all-male, celibate culture of hierarchy.

Roy Bourgeois wanted to talk about the rights of women in the church [2]. That's the ecclesial crime that will get you kicked out.

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