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Vatican's doctrinal congregation clears Bourgeois by condemning him

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Nov. 29, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side
Roy Bourgeois

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has forced Maryknoll to expel Fr. Roy Bourgeois [1] from the society because of his public advocacy of women priests.

You may not be surprised to learn that it was only after Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, that the doctrinal congregation's title of "Sacred" was removed from its coat of arms. That grandiose term was really a misprint for "Scared," the word that captures its centuries-old dynamic of acting out of fear, or generalized ambition-anxiety, rather than out of the love that supposedly motivates the church's actions at all levels.

It is what they are scared of that they condemn, and it is those persons they condemn that give us a reading of what triggers their fearful reactions. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may be the only organization that suffers from a pre-stress anxiety syndrome.

Its officials get all worked up about the possibility of something or someone who may expand scientific (Galileo) or theological (a list too long to print) knowledge, or about someone who may plea for a better understanding of the human condition, like Sr. Jeannine Gramick and her pastoral work with homosexuals.

The doctrinal congregation's officials want to stamp out anything that might upset the pope because, as research at Loyola University in Chicago reveals, bishops and the wannabe bishops waiting in the clerical wings get very anxious unless they are sure the Holy Father would approve of everything they do or do not do during any given day.

In short, a fear of falling keeps men on the narrow path that leads up Mount Clericus, and being afraid of making a mistake is the chief inner feedback mechanism that keeps men -- well, one is tempted to say "in motion," except for the fact that it keeps them immobile instead.

Situated in a building that sits like a wary pitbull on the edge of St. Peter's Square, the present Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith growls ominously as it searches out what its officials deem scary teaching and thinking in the church.

The latest man who scares them enough to condemn him is Bourgeois, a gentle Maryknoll priest who for years has worked for peace and supported the cause of ordaining women. Why does the idea of ordaining women scare Roman authorities so? Why did it so disturb the late Blessed John Paul II that he offered the hard-to-accept claim that the church lacked the authority to ordain women? The idea scared him so much that he sought vainly to have his statement accepted as endowed with the note of infallibility.

The doctrinal congregation was scared enough to interfere in the governance of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, forcing it to expel Bourgeois. Inspect the track record of the doctrinal congregation, however, and you may conclude that by condemning Bourgeois, it is signaling that one day, he will be exonerated and

rehabilitated as a man who read the signs of the times accurately.

Perhaps the best example is Galileo, who followed and furthered the insight of Copernicus that the sun -- not the earth -- was the center of the universe. This notion scared church authorities because it contradicted the teachings of Aristotle and Ptolemy that the earth was the center of the universe. In 1616, the "qualifiers" of the Sacred Congregation declared that Galileo's belief that the sun is stationary was "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture."

Almost 400 years later, Blessed Pope John Paul II rehabilitated Galileo, writing: "The error of the theologians at the time ... was to think that our understanding of the physical world's structure was, in some way, imposed by the literal sense of Sacred Scripture."

"Perfect love," Jesus tells us, "casts out fear," but so does the truth that also makes us free. The exoneration of both Copernicus and Galileo illustrates how, in the long run, human experience -- in this case, through scholars unafraid to reject a literal concrete reading of the scriptures -- catches up with shallow arguments.

The arguments offered against ordaining women, including the papal claim that the church lacks authority to do it, are not compelling. Still, Blessed John Paul II accepted arguments -- Jesus was a man, so priests must be men; priests should resemble Jesus; etc. -- that are not likely to satisfy the human experience of women and their capacity to minister, no matter who they look like. The arguments will not grow any more convincing as time goes by.

The congregation has offered arguments (such as homosexuality's being a "disorder") that do not reveal the truth, but instead suggest that its authors are certainly afraid of something. Human experience wonders why so many issues connected with human sexuality or with gender equality are so scary for them.

Bourgeois may, like many prophets, have acted in ways others would not. Nonetheless, the record of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in taking positions that failed the test of time is perhaps an ironic stamp of approval on Bourgeois, a prophecy in itself that, in time and as the question of women's ordination is tested against human experience, he will turn out to have been right all along.

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