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Jesuit, 92, penalized after eucharistic liturgy with woman priest

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 3, 2012

A Catholic priest who participated in a eucharistic liturgy with a woman priest last month has been ordered to no longer celebrate the Mass or perform any other priestly duties.

Jesuit Fr. Bill Brennan, a 92-year-old Milwaukee-area priest, said the superior of his religious community told him of the restrictions Nov. 29, saying they came at the request of Archbishop Jerome Listecki.

Brennan, a retired parish priest and former missionary to Belize, participated in a liturgy Nov. 17 with Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a woman ordained in the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests movement.

Brennan said he was hesitant to confirm the news regarding his loss of faculties because he was also ordered not to talk to the press.

"I'm risking my existence in the Jesuit order by talking to you," Brennan told *NCR*. "But if I've committed a serious sin, [the archbishop] is supposed to be responsible for condemning me ... he's supposed to stand up and be responsible for that."

Brennan said the restrictions include:

- Suspension of priestly faculties, prohibiting him from performing any priestly duties in public;
- Refraining from contact with media, "through phone, email, or any other means";
- Not appearing as a Jesuit at any "public gatherings, protests or rallies";
- Not leaving the Milwaukee area "for any reason" without his superior's permission.

Brennan said he hasn't had any formal communication with Listecki.

Jeremy Langford, the director of communications for the Jesuits' Chicago-Detroit province, which is merging with the Wisconsin province, said in a statement Monday the order removed Brennan's priestly faculties "after conversation with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee."

The Jesuits "did not approve or sanction" the November eucharistic liturgy and "regrets Fr. Brennan's participation in it," read the statement.

"The Wisconsin province has no plans to take any further action," Langford said in an interview, calling Brennan a "wonderful Jesuit" who has "fought for great causes his whole life."

Julie Wolf, communications director for the Milwaukee archdiocese, said the restrictions on Brennan were a "mutually agreed upon decision" between Listecki and Brennan's Jesuit provincial, Fr. Tom Lawler.

Brennan likened his support for women's ordination to support for women's suffrage: He remembers that at one time, his mother was not able to vote.

"I was born in 1920," Brennan said. "All the while my mother was carrying me and six months after, she could not vote. That's the real initiative in my attitude toward women's ordination."

Brennan said he understands arguments that women do not have a right to ordination and said ordination is a "privilege that is granted to men."

"Why isn't it granted to both?" the priest asked. "And the fundamental approach that I have is that, after all, women have an eminent role to play in the work of creation of children with men. What about the sanctification process? Don't they have any share in the preaching of the Gospel?"

The Vatican labels the ordination of women in the Catholic church as a grave offense and says participants are excommunicated *latae sententiae*, or automatically. Pope John Paul II's 1994 letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* effectively forbade discussion of the issue, saying the church's teaching on the matter was to be "definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

Before deciding to participate in the November liturgy, Brennan said he discussed the matter with Lawler. The invitation to join Sevre-Duszynska at the liturgy was causing him a "real, genuine conscience problem," Brennan said he told Lawler.

"I'm not trying to defy the church," Brennan said he told Lawler, adding that he sees women's ordination as a legitimate question. "Why is it that this privilege of celebrating the Mass and preaching, why is that exclusively a male privilege? Where do we get that? Isn't that worth discussing?"

Lawler told him not to assist at the liturgy, Brennan said.

"At the time, I was still struggling to try to decide what I wanted to do, because obviously I knew I might end up outside the Jesuit order," Brennan said. "But I just felt this was an earthy issue, and you can't cover it over with spiritual or authoritarian dictates."

Roy Bourgeois, another longtime priest who supports women's ordination, was notified of his dismissal [1] from his religious order, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, over the same issue Nov. 19.

Bourgeois, who served with Maryknoll for 45 years, first came into controversy with his order after he participated in Sevre-Duszynska's ordination in the Womenpriests group in 2008.

Roman Catholic Women Priests is an international initiative that ordains both men and women. It counts among its members more than 150 women who have been ordained priests and bishops by the organization since it began in 2002.

Brennan co-presided at a liturgy with Sevre-Duszynska during the annual gathering of SOA Watch, a group founded by Bourgeois in 1990 to protest a U.S. Army training school at Fort Benning, Ga., formerly known as the School of the Americas.

The SOA Watch gathering, which takes place in Columbus, Ga., each November, calls for the closure of the Army school, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. The school in the past has been implicated in human rights abuses in Latin America.

Sevre-Duszynska said the idea to ask Brennan to participate in the liturgy initially came at last year's SOA Watch gathering, where she had celebrated a similar liturgy [2] with Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada.

Sevre-Duszynska had remembered meeting Brennan at the 2010 SOA Watch gathering, she said, when the two

were part of a group of 29 people who were arrested [3] outside the gates of Fort Benning for stepping out of a designated protest area.

The liturgy at this year's event was dedicated to people who risk arrest for issues of conscience, "who have devoted their lives to bringing the Kin-dom here on Earth," Sevre-Duszynska said.

A Milwaukee-area native, Brennan served for 17 years in Belize when it was still a British colony, known as British Honduras. Following that, he served in Milwaukee-area parishes, primarily with Latino communities.

Asked whether he was worried about further restrictions being place on him for his support of women's ordination, Brennan said: "When you have a conscience problem, you have to follow your conscience and then take the consequences. I have to take the consequences."

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