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Reconciling the passions of the members of the church

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Dec. 20, 2012 Young Voices

The news is filled recently with stories of longtime, loyal Catholics being told the beliefs they have arrived at through experience and reflection are not good enough.

As *NCR* reported [1] Nov. 19, Roy Bourgeois was dismissed from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in October. Bourgeois has made his beliefs that women should be able to serve as priests in the Roman Catholic Church known in recent years, and presents it as an issue of justice that the church needs to address.

Earlier this month, Jesuit Fr. Bill Brennan from the Milwaukee province was sanctioned for celebrating Mass with a woman who presided, as reported by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* *[2]*. Brennan is 92 years old and claims that his belief that women can viably serve as priests comes from his admiration of his own mother.

A week later, Bishop Robert Morlino of the Diocese of Madison, Wis., banned two nuns in the diocese from providing workshops and spiritual guidance at any Catholic churches within the 11-county diocese, as reported in the *Wisconsin State Journal* *[3]*. The two longtime Dominican nuns were part of an interfaith spirituality center named Wisdom's Well. Two other women connected with Wisdom's Well were also banned from presenting workshops and providing spiritual guidance at churches in the diocese out of the bishop's fear that the women "may not share an authentic view of the Catholic Church's approach to interreligious dialogue."

The church is clearly defining itself and what it means to be a true Catholic, as well as where it wants to draw lines. There is a lot of ebb and flow over the years in regards to the church's view on social issues, well documented in the book *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* by John T. Noonan Jr. Peter Steinfels of *The New York Times* *[4]*, in his review of the book in 2005, put it best when talking about the myth that church teaching never changes:

> Such denial, still widespread, means that examining change in official teaching -- or what became known in the 19th century as "development of doctrine" -- poses two challenges: first, to establish that alterations -- some more than minor -- have unquestionably occurred; and second, to show how they can be reconciled with the church's claim to preach the same essential message Jesus and his disciples did 2,000 years ago, presumably deriving criteria that can help distinguish legitimate evolution in the future from deviations or betrayals.

The truth is the church probably has a lot more cracking down to do if it really wants to maintain a consistent, non-hypocritical ethic on how its members perceive women's ordination and interfaith relations. If the church were to ban all its leaders -- ordained and non-ordained -- who didn't follow all the teachings espoused by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and by all its local bishops, I wonder how many leaders would be left in a church that is already seeing declining ordained leadership? I wonder how many more followers would throw their hands up and realize this church doesn't represent their beliefs? The Roman Catholic Church in the United States still has four times the membership of the next closest denomination, but it is commonly said the second-largest denomination in the United States is "former Catholics."

A new book, *Hungering and Thirsting for Justice* *[5]* (edited by Lacey Louwagie and Kate Ward and available from ACTA Publications), came out this year and documents stories from 10 young adult Catholics "trying to discover how to carry out their faith in their daily lives. You may not agree with everything they think, say, or do, but you will admire and be challenged by their passion, dedication, courage, and love for God and others." The most impressive part of this book is it allows the writers to explain how they got to believe what they believe. It's not always where they thought their perspective would lead. But real-life experience and conscience, along with study of scripture and church history, helped to lead them to views that may not always be supported by the church.

People like Roy Bourgeois, Fr. Bill Brennan and the Dominican sisters have faithfully served their religious orders and the church for decades. Simultaneously, there is a new generation of people who are forming their beliefs with perspectives being shaped by the church and other sources in a globalizing, digitizing world. Somehow the church has to reconcile how it can be the leader in denominational membership with so much diversity in views on social and moral issues.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman helped launch the blog youngadultcatholics-blog.com [6] in 2008. He also blogs at sweitman-solutions.com [7] about technology.]

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