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

Australian priest, advocate for women's ordination excommunicated

Brian Roewe | Sep. 24, 2013

An Australian priest vocal in his support of women's ordination has become the first person excommunicated for such beliefs under the papacy of Pope Francis.

Fr. Greg Reynolds of Melbourne, Australia, told *NCR* by email late Monday night his initial reaction was "shock" upon learning of his separation from the church. Australian media have reported he is the first member of the Melbourne archdiocese excommunicated and the first priest from the area laicized for reasons other than pedophilia.

The news came Sept. 18 through a canon lawyer for the Melbourne archdiocese, Fr. John Salvano, who invited Reynolds a few weeks earlier to meet "to discuss 'some canonical issue,' " Reynolds said. The former priest said Salvano presented him the letter of excommunication and proceeded to read it to him, since Reynolds did not read Latin.

Part of the shock stemmed from uncertainty with who initiated the excommunication and laicization process. During the meeting, Salvano told Reynolds that while Melbourne Archbishop Denis Hart previously considered beginning the laicization process, he had not gone forward with that plan. Instead, unknown people had contacted the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which requested Reynolds' file from Hart.

"I have no idea who took the initiative to approach the CDF," Reynolds told *NCR*.

The Melbourne archdiocese, 14 hours ahead of U.S. Central time zone, had not responded to requests for comment before this story published.

The letter, a copy of which *NCR* obtained and translated, accuses Reynolds of heresy (Canon 751) and determined he incurred *latae sententiae* excommunication for throwing away the consecrated host or retaining it "for a sacrilegious purpose" (Canon 1367). It also referenced Canon 1369 (speaking publicly against church teaching) in its review of the case.

"Pope Francis, Supreme Pontiff having heard the presentation of this Congregation concerning the grave reason for action ... of [Fr. Greg Reynolds] of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, all the preceding actions to be taken having been followed, with a final and unappealable decision and subject to no recourse, has decreed dismissal from the clerical state is to be imposed on said priest for the good of the Church," read the document, signed by Archbishop Gerhard Muller, prefect for the congregation, and his secretary, Jesuit Archbishop Luis Ladaria.

Excommunication refers to the severest measure of censure for Catholics and forbids an individual from participation in any eucharistic celebration or other worship ceremonies; the reception or celebration of sacraments; and holding any ecclesiastical or governing role in the church.

The document, dated May 31 -- coincidentally Reynolds' 60th birthday -- provided no reason for the excommunication. However, a separate letter sent Friday from Hart to his archdiocesan priests indicated

Reynolds' support of women's ordination was a primary reason.

"The decision by Pope Francis to dismiss Fr Reynolds from the clerical state and to declare his automatic excommunication has been made because of his public teaching on the ordination of women contrary to the teaching of the Church and his public celebration of the Eucharist when he did not hold faculties to act publicly as a priest," Hart wrote.

But Reynolds said he believes the excommunication also resulted from his support of the gay community. He told *NCR* that in the last two years, he has attended rallies in Melbourne advocating same-sex marriage and has officiated at mass weddings of gay couples on the steps of Parliament -- "all unofficial of course."

"My motivation is trying to encourage reform and clear need for renewal in the church," he said. "I still love the church and am committed to it, I'm just trying to bring about in my own little way to help highlight some of the failing and limitations," he told the *Standard* newspaper [1].

Since Francis began his papacy in March, he has twice pointedly stated his alignment with church teaching on women's ordination.

In an impromptu press conference with media July 28 aboard the papal plane during his return to Rome from World Youth Day in Brazil, Francis said [2], "On the ordination of women, the Church has spoken and said no. Pope John Paul II, in a definitive formulation, said that door is closed." More recently, in his first one-on-one interview conducted on behalf of 16 Jesuit publications, Francis said the role of women [3] in the church requires further investigation but did not address women's ordination.

Reynolds told *NCR* that while he knew the pope had reiterated that the door to women's ordination was closed, he said his hope was that it didn't mean the door was locked, "or maybe there is a way in through an open window."

"I am very surprised that this order has come under his watch; it seems so inconsistent with everything else he has said and done," he said.

In November 2010, Australian media reported Reynolds had devoted his homily to three parishes one weekend in September to proclaiming it was God's will to include women in the priesthood and said denying women the right equaled "obstructing the work of the Holy Spirit."

"I feel I can no longer sit back and remain silent," he preached, according to the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* [4].

Reynolds resigned his position in August 2011 as pastor of two rural parishes, and Hart subsequently removed his faculties. From there, Reynolds founded Inclusive Catholics [5] as a way "to minister to and with Catholic people who share" his beliefs on women's ordination and homosexuality, according to the Inclusive Catholics website.

"I see Women's Ordination as a matter of justice and important for the renewal of the Church. The current teaching is sexist and helping to reinforce the ongoing oppression of women particularly in the developing world," he told *NCR*, acknowledging he had been inspired by Roy Bourgeois, a former Maryknoll priest also excommunicated and removed from his order for speaking out in favor of women's ordination.

The Inclusive Catholics group meets semimonthly, usually at a Protestant church. At times, women have led various parts of the liturgy and preached the homily, though Reynolds leads the eucharistic elements. Those participating in the ceremonies include gay people, victims of clergy sex abuse, laicized priests and others

disenfranchised with the formal Catholic church.

"While in no way compromising our Catholic belief in the Eucharist, including the Real Presence, we do not restrict peoples' reception of Holy Communion on the grounds of their worthiness or theology," a statement from Reynolds reads on the site's homepage.

In August 2012, Reynolds and the group became the source of controversy when a story in *The Age* newspaper [6] reported that a dog had received Communion at a recent service.

Reynolds was not aware of the incident with the dog during the liturgy and only learned of it later, he said at the time and yesterday in an interview with *NCR*.

Though the Melbourne archbishop and others have characterized the group's liturgies as "illicit" on several occasions, Hart?s criticism of Reynolds? liturgies did not reference the dog incident.

Days after the story was published, Reynolds received a letter from Hart, a copy of which he posted [7] to the Inclusive Catholics website. In the letter, dated Aug. 10, 2012, Hart expressed concern with the interview and his public celebration of the Eucharist while suspended from active ministry.

"As your statements and actions are inconsistent of your resignation from active priestly ministry and the consequent suspension of your faculties to act publicly as a priest, I am forced to warn you that if this stance continues, I will be forced to take further canonical action for the good of the Church," Hart wrote.

A subsequent letter from Salvano, dated Sept. 5 of that year, informed Reynolds that Hart had begun the administrative procedure for his dismissal from the clerical state.

Reynolds said he intends to continue his ministry with Inclusive Catholics, saying he has received "a wonderful groundswell of sympathy and support for us in recent days." He said he has not decided if he will appeal the excommunication.

"I firmly believe in the Primacy of Conscience and that loyal dissent is an important part of any healthy organization," Reynolds said.

For additional coverage:

"**Excommunicated Australian priest: I did not give Communion to a dog [8]**," Sept. 30, 2013

"**Australia archbishop: Dog incident played role in excommunication [9]**," Oct. 3, 2013

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org [10]. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe [11].]

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