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Bourgeois tells Maryknoll: 'I cannot lie, I cannot recant'

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 8, 2011
Roy Bourgeois

Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois reads from his letter to Maryknoll Superior General Fr. Edward Dougherty outside the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington April 8. (Photos courtesy of Emily Cohen, Womens Ordination Conference)

With four days to go before likely dismissal from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and laicization by the Vatican, Fr. Roy Bourgeois has officially told his order he will not recant his support of women?s ordination.

Bourgeois announced his stand outside the Vatican's Apostolic Nunciature in Washington during a Friday vigil attended by over a hundred of his supporters. He read aloud from a letter he sent that morning to Maryknoll superior general Fr. Edward Dougherty.
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The longtime peace activist and founder of SOA Watch received a letter March 29 from Dougherty warning him of his dismissal. That letter gave him 15 days to "publicly recant" his support of women's ordination before a second warning will be sent, followed by the forwarding of the case to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith "with a request for laicization."

In his formal letter of reply to his order Bourgeois says he cannot comply with Dougherty?s request for him to recant ?without betraying my conscience.?

?In essence, you are telling me to lie and say I do not believe that God calls both men and women to the priesthood,? Bourgeois writes in the letter. ?This I cannot do, therefore I will not recant.?

Before reading from the letter at Friday's vigil, Bourgeois participated in a prayer service led by members of Roman Catholic Womepriests and received a blessing from those in attendance, with supporters placing their hands on his head and body, said Erin Saiz Hanna, who attended the event.

The hour-long service took place in pouring rain outside the nunciature and was hosted by the Women?s Ordination Conference, which has also been collecting signatures for an online petition in support of Bourgeois.

Over 6,000 people have signed that petition as of Friday, said Hanna, the conference?s executive director. Fifteen progressive Catholic organizations, including Call to Action and Roman Catholic Womenpriests, have also signed.

At the end of the vigil, which was attended by people from as far away as San Francisco, Hanna said Bourgeois attempted to give copies of the petition and his letter to the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers to a representative at the nunciature.

Although he was prevented from doing so by Secret Service agents who said they could not open the door to the building, Hanna said the event was ?very moving.?

?The sidewalk was lined with people in support of Roy,? she said. ?I think this may be the starting point, and maybe even a tipping point, for a lot of dialogue for women?s roles in the church.?

Speaking by phone yesterday, Bourgeois said that while he wasn?t sure what sort of impact a vigil outside the nunciature would have, he chose to release his letter that way in order to ?shine a light on injustice.?

?I?m hoping that [the vigil] will really call more attention to this injustice of excluding women from the priesthood, this whole issue of gender equality in our church,? said Bourgeois.

The activist priest also compared his action outside the nunciature to protests SOA Watch has been hosting outside the White House this week. The group, which calls attention to the Army?s training of Latin American soldiers at what was formerly called the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., is also hosting a lobbying day on Capitol Hill Monday.

In the letter to his superiors, Bourgeois cites five reasons why he thinks the exclusion of women from the priesthood ?defies both faith and reason and cannot stand up to scrutiny.? Among them are a 1976 report by the Pontifical Biblical Commission -- which, he says, concluded there was ?no valid case? against the ordination of women in scripture -- and the fact that he believes the call to be a priest comes only from God.

?I believe our Creator who is the Source of life and called forth the sun and stars is certainly capable of calling women to be priests,? he writes.

The 1976 report, which was published in Catholic News Service?s *Origins* documentary service, concluded that

there wasn?t enough evidence in the New Testament to ?settle in a clear way and once and for all?the possible accession of women to the presbyterate.?

When asked how he views his decision to continue his support for women?s ordination in light of his vow as a priest to support church teaching and obey his superiors, Bourgeois said that he felt that his ?first allegiance was to God.?

?I?ve always felt that when you see an injustice, really it?s your conscience and faith in God calling you to address the issue and to break your silence. And when your superior tells you to be obedient, then you have to make a decision: Do I follow God or man? And there was no question I must go with my faith in God.?

Bourgeois also raised that issue of the primacy of conscience in his letter, citing a 1968 commentary by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on the Vatican II document on the church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*.

?Over the pope ... there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary, even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority,? Bourgeois quotes from the future pope?s words.

As the days tick by until his likely laicization, Bourgeois said he hopes his situation might act as an example for others who are facing similar struggles with their conscience.

?The issue resolves around conscience, and really living out in our lives -- all of us, all of us, my family, you, I, all of us -- with what we believe. In our lives, in our journey of faith, we are going to come across situations like this -- in our church, in our communities, in our families -- and we have to make decisions rooted in our faith and our belief in a loving a just God,? said Bourgeois.

?And the decisions that we are going to make will not be easy. It?s going to upset others -- our family, our friends. What?s important is to, in a loving way, follow our conscience, not get angry and simply embrace the consequences, the cross. This is what Jesus taught: embracing the cross.?

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

To see the original letter of dismissal sent to Bourgeois by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, click here [1].

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Editor's Note: To see pictures from Friday's vigil, provided by the Women's Ordination Conference, see the slideshow below.

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