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Answering to a Higher Power

Ken Briggs | Nov. 23, 2012 NCR Today

How is the punishment of Ray Boergeois like the jailing of Martin Luther King Jr.?

Or not.

Both stood up to authority in dangerous surroundings. King defied segregation in the city of Birmingham where death was always a firebomb or gunshot away. Such courage is unimaginable to most of us. The young Baptist preacher didn't flinch. He resolutely looked his sworn enemies in the eye and they dragged him to jail. His theology of non-violence taught him that breaking the laws of Alabama in the name of a greater spiritual summons meant accepting unjust punishment. Roy Bourgeois's brushes with violence came while protesting against South American dictators and becoming a thorn in the side of the School of the Americas -- the breeding ground for Latin American militarist terrorism -- and was arrested countless time for civil disobedience. But the Catholic church he served as a priest was less tolerant than the state's judicial system which never interfered with his priesthood or sentenced him to a long prison sentence. By contrast, the Vatican has stripped him of his priesthood for disagreeing with its opposition to women as priests. From his responses, it seems safe to say he continues to speak this way in the name of the same Almighty One as the Catholic church invokes to oust him from his ministry.

The two examples are far from equivalent, of course, but they do raise similar questions about what constitutes legitimate government, religious or civil, and whether those who openly flout its laws or required beliefs better serve their purposes than those who pull back from confronting perceived errors or evils in the name of order and gradualism. Was Dr. King's decision to violate the law and go to prison an indispensable act in a divine drama -- and would the movement suffered mightily if he had agreed to a stand-down compromise? Could Roy Bourgeois better served the cause of women's ordination than by being thrown out of his order in loyalty to it? Not all individual law-breaking is providential or inspired by the call of destiny, to say the least. But the ranks of saints have plenty of examples of renegades who obeyed a higher calling. This isn't to minimize their duress or justify the convictions; only perhaps to see a context as they might see it.

In human terms, exemplary figures like Nelson Mandela and Cesar Chavez understood perfectly the need to risk life and limb by marching into the teeth of enforcers of the law. We all gain from their sacrifices and from their willingness to accept consequences. King paid with his life; Roy Bourgeois, like Bill Callahan before him, was fully aware that his priestly status hung by a thread. For a man of his immense bravery and faith, this is bad news, but in light of his commitments, not much of an obstacle. And, besides, as Dr. King might have said, you can't take too seriously the rulings of disabled judges.

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