

## Priests offer support for women's ordination

by Thomas C. Fox

WOW2015

**Philadelphia** — Four men -- one active and three inactive priests -- shared their diverse pastoral and intellectual journeys Saturday, explaining how each eventually came to support women in their quests for ordination. Taking turns on a panel at the Women's Ordination Worldwide conference here, each said his pathway went through growing understandings of injustices within the church and a desire to join more completely in solidarity with the Catholic faithful.

To hear them tell their stories, there was nothing especially "radical" in their intentions; support of women's ordination came naturally and out of a need to maintain personal integrity and to pastor more effectively.

Each of the men, at one point or another, became alienated from an institution each said seemed to value control over compassion.

The panel of Tony Flannery, Roy Bourgeois, Jack McClure and Paul Collins was the single largest male event at this otherwise mostly female conference, sponsored by the U.S.-based Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), in its second day here and seemingly gaining momentum, given the overall spirit of the gathering. Each man spoke of the way values of inclusion and curiosity were instilled in him at an early age. Each explained how he gradually grew disaffected with church practices, especially Vatican overreach. Each explained how support for the ordination of women came as a means to eradicate injustice. Each explained how the idea of women's ordination had expanded his vision of the priesthood and eventually had brought peace of mind and a greater sense of solidarity with the Catholic faithful.

Flannery said he joined the Redemptorists at age 17 in 1964 and was ordained a priest ten years later, in 1974. He spent his priestly life as a preacher, offering many retreats, mostly around Ireland. During that time, he said, he also grew as a writer, penning numerous articles and books in a variety of publications, both religious and secular. For some 14 years, he contributed a regular column for the Redemptorist magazine *Reality*.

It was in 2012 he was first contacted by the Vatican, which listed objections to articles he had written. Summoned to Rome by the superior general of the Redemptorists, he began a long process, one that he termed blatantly unjust.

"I found I had been accused, judged and sentenced before I had a chance to defend myself," he said. "I objected most that there had been no proper procedure. The process violated my most basic human rights."

He said that after Pope Francis had been elected to the papacy he received word that the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith had become “of more than one mind” and if he could work with a theologian he might be able to rectify his canonical situation.

“I refused,” he said. “It would have taken me into the same unjust process.”

Roy Bourgeois told the audience he had been ordained a Maryknoll priest in 1972 and soon found himself living and working among the poor in Bolivia for five years. That’s where his “conversion” process began, he said. He learned about liberation theology and about what it means to accompany the poor and marginalized.

After returning to the United States, he became an outspoken opponent of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, he recalled. He had seen how that policy had inflicted hardship and suffering upon the poor with whom he had lived and worked.

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It was during that time, he recalled, he was approached by a woman who asked him to examine injustices closer to home, injustices within his own church, injustices women were suffering at the hands the male clerics.

He began to examine the condition of women in the church and their exclusion from the priesthood. He pondered the words of the women he had been listening to and decided to “to break my silence.”

“I called for the ordination of women and attended the ordination of Janice Sevre-Duszynska in Lexington, Ky.,” Bourgeois recalled. “It was such a joy. Needless to say the Vatican did not share my joy.”

Bourgeois’ support for women’s ordination eventually led to his being expelled from Maryknoll in 2012.

Precious Blood Fr. Jack McClure, among the four the only priest now in active institutionally sanctioned ministry -- and the only one who wore a Roman collar during the panel discussion -- began his story by asking the audience of some 500 to pray with him to help gather the Spirit and speak truthfully.

He used recent Scripture readings to explain the way Jesus always felt comfortable walking with women, reminding the gathered that Precious Blood priests feel comfortable speaking through the lenses of Scripture.

McClure recalled he grew up in southern Iowa, converted to Catholicism, attended seminary, and chose to enter the Precious Blood fathers “because their beliefs were congruent with what I believed.”

The San Francisco Bay area priest, most recently the pastor of Most Holy Redeemer Parish in the Castro, told the audience that his experience as a priest has been primarily pastoral in nature. Some have referred to Most Holy Redeemer as the largest “gay” parish in the nation, but McClure countered, saying it is simply an open parish, a “welcoming” parish.

Many years ago, at the beginning of the 1980s, McClure said he left his Precious Blood order for what he called an eight-year interruption. He was disturbed by church rules and felt he could do more outside institutional boundaries. He spend a lot of time working with homeless children.

It was during that period he married. “I left,” he said, “not to marry, but because of some of the

discrepancies in the church that I found hard to live with.”

Eventually, after his marriage ended, he returned to his Precious Blood community because, he explained, he felt it was in the community he could further serve those in need, especially the young.

He shared that he now felt called to break his silence on women’s ordination as part of a call to dialogue initiated by Pope Francis, adding the renewal minded pontiff had told the church “that dialogue should be a habit.”

“I am glad to be a part of it,” McClure said.

He went on to say that Precious Blood fathers place an emphasis on preaching. “My community also believes we are called to reconciliation,” he said. “My sisters, I would ask in the name of every man who has ever walked the earth to forgive us for when we have been inappropriate in acting out of a need to be in control.”

“I believe that any kind of discrimination, any kind of bullying, is just wrong and we have to stop it,” said McClure. “We have to stop it now.”

“I am grateful to be here, very grateful to be here,” he concluded, indicating he felt a sense of peace in being with the women in their support for greater justice in the church.

Paul Collins, the Australian author, was the last person on the panel to speak.

Born in a working-class suburb of Melbourne, Australia, in 1940, Collins studied, gaining degrees in history and theology. He was ordained in 1967 and became a broadcaster and writer.

“I grew up in a corner shop. I was an only child and my parents collaborated. They modeled absolute equality,” Collins said. “There were no assigned tasks for gender.” Those notions of gender equality, he said, stayed with him for life.

He said that one of the things he learned is that in religious life, financial independence is important. “If you have money coming in, you can get away with things.”

His order stood by him every step of the way through his successful ministries in broadcasting and writing.

At an early stage in his writing career, he assembled some of his ideas and put them in book form, publishing *Papal Power* in 1997. In that book he argued that if it was service that characterized papal leadership in the first millennium, power is what characterized it in the second.

Within six months of publication, he received a letter passed down the church hierarchical ranks from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. “One of the problems of *Papal Power* was that I said the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith employed second-rate consultants.” Later asked if there was anything he had regretted in the book, he recalled telling the interviewer he wished he had written CDF consultants were “third-rate.”

Asked how he felt about being excommunicated, he responded, “Wonderfully, because I have never felt more communion with the church.”

In March 2001, he resigned after 33 years from his active priestly ministry. At the time, he told *NCR* he decided to resign as an “active” priest to return to being an ordinary Catholic believer. “Many people will justifiably ask: Why? The reason is simple: I can no longer conscientiously subscribe to the policies and

theological emphases coming from the Vatican and other official church sources."

After a question-and-answer period, the moderator noted that while these priests had suffered at the hands of the institution -- and paid the price -- they were hardly alone. She asked women in the audience who had also been banished by church officials for speaking their consciences and pursuing ordination to stand up. After a bit of hesitation, the women began to rise from their chairs. Between 50 and 100 women stood as the audience recognized their hardships with sustained applause.

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