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'Conscience led me to ordination as Woman Priest'

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Aug. 9, 2008 ordination ceremony

Conscience is something very sacred. It gives us a sense of right and wrong and urges us to do the right thing.

Conscience is what compelled Austrian Franz Jagerstatter to refuse to enlist in Hitler's army. On August 9, 1943, this humble farmer and father of four was executed for following his conscience.

One year ago, the story of Franz Jagerstatter was the theme of the homily by Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois when, on Aug. 9, 2008, he attended my ordination in Lexington as a Roman Catholic Womanpriest. A longtime friend, Roy is the founder of the School of the Americas Watch. He has spent a total of four years in prison as a "prisoner of conscience" as part of the movement to close the SOA. The SOA, a U.S.-military training school for Latin American troops located in Fort Benning, Georgia, has been producing death squad leaders and human rights abusers since 1946.

Roy participated in my ordination Mass. He celebrated the Eucharist with me, the other women priests and the woman bishop who ordained me. He laid hands on me in blessing after I was ordained.

In his homily Roy said, "It is our conscience that compels us to be here today. How can we speak out against the injustice of our country's foreign policy in Latin America and Iraq if we are silent about the injustice of our church here at home?"

Roy Bourgeois followed his conscience and crossed the ecclesiastical line against women's ordination - the first time a male priest in good standing participated in the ordination of a Roman Catholic woman, a watershed event in the Roman Catholic Church. His prophetic words and actions, today's Good News, have traveled across the planet in newspapers, magazines, TV and the Internet. They have evoked much joy about renewing our church and priestly ministry with women priests in a discipleship of equals.

Within a few days of the ordination, Roy was summoned to his religious order's headquarters in Maryknoll, New York to account for his participation in my ordination and for his homily. He was questioned by his superior and two council members and asked to fill out the "dissenting priest's form" which was sent to the Vatican. When asked to recant his support for women priests, he refused.

The Vatican's Office for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly The Inquisition), now run by former San Francisco Cardinal William Levada, said Roy would be excommunicated from the church he has served for over 37 years if he did not recant.

Meanwhile, Catholics and interfaith peace-and-justice makers wrote letters in support of Roy and women priests to the superior general of the Maryknolls, the Papal Nuncio, and their local bishop. They sent emails to the pope and to Cardinal Levada.

Catholic reform groups, including Call to Action, Women's Ordination Conference and Roman Catholic Womenpriests put together a petition to the Vatican to support Roy's prophetic stance. Among the thousands who signed were 122 women religious leaders who identified themselves and their religious orders. These women thus also crossed the ecclesiastical line against women's ordination and followed their conscience.

Not long afterwards, the Vatican announced that it would be conducting two investigations of American nuns to determine whether the sisters are "living in fidelity to the religious life." Nuns in no other nations are being asked this question.

Did the courageous women religious leaders frighten the Vatican bullies? Are the investigations connected to the boldness of these "uppity" nuns? Are the men in the Vatican quivering because more women religious might step forward to claim their vocations and be ordained priests?

Roman Catholic Womenpriests continues to grow and serve the people of God in grassroots communities. We have ordained and continue to ordain women, including nuns, whose vocation is the priesthood.

Pope Benedict XVI has named this the "year of the priest." I invite our brother priests to hear the voice of their conscience and cross the line with us as we women are ordained.

The author is a Roman Catholic Womanpriest, peace and justice activist and a retired teacher. She is working on a Doctor of Ministry degree.

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