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Roy Bourgeois' priesthood can never truly end

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

He won a purple heart for his service in Vietnam.

He lived and worked among the poor in Bolivia for five years.

When his friends, Maryknoll sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, along with two other women, were raped and murdered in El Salvador, he became an outspoken opponent of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

He has served nearly five years in federal prison for non-violent protests.

And now Fr. Roy Bourgeois has been told that he no longer has a place in the community of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

For more than a hundred years, the name Maryknoll has been synonymous with ministries of justice, peace, and care for the world's most marginalized. But, as is the case with so many church institutions, their fight for justice is a strictly external exercise. These days there seems to be little possibility for justice to roll down within the internal structures of the Catholic church.

Few Roman Catholic priests in this country today have risked as much as Bourgeois has to live out the gospel. He answered Jesus' call to be a peacemaker; he has an insatiable hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Fewer Roman Catholic priests have dared to apply their high-minded social justice theories to the demoralization and marginalization of women by the church that they serve.

One wonders to what extent Bourgeois's decades of witnessing of suffering and violence gave him the eyes to see injustice and the courage to voice his dissent regardless of the risk.

Bourgeois was first called to speak prophetically about the ordination of women when his long time friend and fellow activist, Janice Sevre-Duszynska, decided to pursue her life-long call to ordination through the Roman Catholic Womenpriests. Bourgeois not only attended the 2008 ordination ceremony in Lexington, KY, he also offered the homily.

From that moment, Bourgeois began asking publicly the questions that dwell in the minds of the majority of Catholics in this country. "We state that the call to be a priest is a gift and comes from God. How can we as men say our call from God is authentic, but your call as women is not? Who are we to reject God's call of women to the priesthood?" he asked in an interview with *NCR* yesterday.

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The Vatican sent him a letter that following November, giving him 30 days to recant his position on women's ordination or face automatic excommunication.

Bourgeois declined to recant. Things proceeded rather quietly until this past February, when he participated on a panel discussion at the New York premiere of the documentary *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican*. The film chronicles the struggle for women's ordination in the Catholic Church, and features extensive clips of an interview with Bourgeois.

The post-film program, apparently, was the last straw for the Vatican and the Maryknolls, who claimed that by participating in this conversation, Bourgeois had disobeyed the explicit instructions of his superiors.

I attended that panel discussion. It was the first time I met Bourgeois. He is unlike any Catholic priest I've met before. He did not have a shred of the egoism, clericalism, or privilege that I've detected in many Roman Catholic priests.

What stays with me most from that event was Bourgeois's explanation of why he chose to follow his conscience by publicly supporting women's ordination. Bourgeois conceded that many priests fear losing their jobs, pensions, and sacramental power if they speak out about the ordination of women. But, he said, "I'd rather eat at a soup kitchen and be free rather than not do something that I'm called to do."

In his March 18 letter threatening Bourgeois with expulsion from his religious order, Fr. Edward M. Dougherty, the Maryknoll superior general, and Edward J. McGovern, the Maryknoll's secretary general, charge Bourgeois with, among other things, causing "grave scandal" to "the people of God, the church, especially in the United States, and many of the Maryknoll priests and brothers."

But if you listened to Bourgeois during the panel, the only scandal he seems to experience is his embarrassment over not speaking out sooner on the issue of women's ordination. "I just feel bad it took me so long," Bourgeois admitted sheepishly.

It's interesting to note the phrase "many Maryknoll priests and brothers" in the letter. Are Dougherty and McGovern aware that there are other Maryknoll priests and brothers who agree with Bourgeois but have yet to find the courage to speak publicly?

As Bourgeois reminded the *Pink Smoke* crowd, "Silence is the voice of consent."

The homepage of the Maryknoll Missionaries displays a timeline of major events in the life of its order. Decades from now, how will they mark this moment in their history? How will Maryknoll, whose Orbis publishing house has produced some of the finest texts on liberation theology and the prophetic vocation, reconcile the fact that it allowed one of its most faithful servants to be disinvented from the Eucharistic table?

After four decades risking his life and his personal comfort for the sake of peace and the liberation of the poor, Bourgeois has been stripped of his sacramental power. He is in full solidarity with the women who have been told by the Catholic hierarchy that God cannot work sacramentally through them.

The hierarchy acts as though it has the power to reject and invalidate the vocations of Bourgeois and all of the women denied the opportunity to function as priests. They forget, however, that the calling, and the holiness that flows from it, comes from God alone. Those who are truly called by God can never be prevented from touching the lives and transforming the hearts of God's people.

Regardless of the actions of the Vatican and the decision of the Maryknoll community, Roy Bourgeois's courage, his integrity, his humility, and his many sacrifices will continue to be a sacramental sign for us all.

The Women's Ordination Conference has set up a petition urging the Maryknoll leadership to support Roy Bourgeois and desist from issuing a second canonical warning. You can sign it by clicking here.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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