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Time of ambiguity shadows Maryknollers' assembly

by Joe Veneroso



Maryknollers carry on discussion during break at the U.S. regional assembly in Ossining N.Y., in May. (Fr. Joe Veneroso, MM)

FIRST PERSON

OSSINING, N.Y. -- I was surprised to see Fr. Roy Bourgeois' name on the list of Maryknollers attending our annual U.S. regional assembly from May 23 to 27.

More than a month had passed since the superior general of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Fr. Ed Dougherty, issued the first canonical warning to Roy to recant his position on the ordination of women or face dismissal from our society and laicization by Rome. No one expected Roy, who had been ordered to be silent on this issue by former superiors, to comply now, despite having been excommunicated in 2009 for participating in an attempted ordination of a woman the year before.

All members of the U.S. region are entitled to attend the assembly, so Roy's presence meant he was still a member of the region; the "MM" after his name meant he was still a Maryknoller; and the title "Father" meant he was still a Roman Catholic priest, albeit excommunicated.

I wondered if Roy's situation would overshadow the assembly and distract it from other critical issues. We had a packed agenda: vocations, engaging the U.S. church in mission; the mission of Jesus in the 21st century; decreasing and aging membership; updating our Praesidium safe-environment course, and Maryknoll's centennial celebrations.

A group of Maryknollers arranged an informal conversation with Roy following the first day's session. Thirty-eight of the 62 members attending the assembly took part.

Roy gave a rehash of his vocation journey. He said he considered it hypocritical to denounce injustice in other institutions and turn a blind eye to what he sees as an injustice in the church.

When Roy went beyond speaking out for women's ordination and actively participated in such a ceremony in 2008, he crossed a line Rome could not ignore. He pushed the envelope, and the envelope pushed back. "The hammer came down swiftly," he said, in the form of a letter from Rome demanding he publicly recant within 30 days or face excommunication.

His main concern, he said, was how this would affect his family, especially his aged father. He was relieved to receive their blessing.

Not mentioned, but germane to understanding how Roy and Maryknoll got into this predicament, was Roy's participation last February in a public forum in New York City on the documentary "Pink Smoke Over the Vatican," which, as the title implies, promoted women's ordination. An excommunicated priest, ignoring superiors' orders not to speak on this topic but publicly doing so under the nose of New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, in whose archdiocese Maryknoll headquarters resides, was the last straw.

The first canonical warning of dismissal from the society was more devastating, Roy said, than the excommunication. The second warning has not yet been received, he said, but it could come at any time. "I am in big trouble," he admitted.

One of our younger priests asked if Roy had given any thought to how his actions might impact Maryknoll. Roy responded with an articulate, albeit unrelated, defense of the supremacy of conscience, especially when denouncing the evils of sexism in the world and in the church. I was not the only one to conclude this was Roy's way of saying, "No."

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One older priest said he didn't want to see Roy dismissed from the society and saw nothing more to be gained by his continuing to speak out. "You made your point," he said. "Rome knows who you are and what you stand for."

Another priest asked how Roy reconciled his conscience with the Maryknoll community, or with many young people who do not have a problem with the institutional church. Roy said the young people he has met enthusiastically support him. Yet, again, no mention of the Maryknoll connection, or disconnection.

My disagreement with Roy is not over women's ordination but rather about the oath of obedience we all took, in which we promise "to obey our legitimate superiors." Four simple, yet profound and powerful, words. I asked Roy, my friend and brother and comrade-in-arms against injustice in the world, "How do you reconcile your actions with our oath of obedience?" Roy expounded again on the primacy of conscience, the evils of sexism and racism, the plight of women, and the civil rights movement.

One man suggested all our members might benefit by this discussion. Fr. Michael Duggan, the Maryknoll regional superior, found a place to include it during the superior general's 'State of the Society' address.

On May 26, after running down a list of many developments, Dougherty addressed the 'elephant in the room' who was sitting next to me. 'Doc' admitted feeling awkward. Roy remained silent.

I asked, 'What can I as an individual, we as an assembly, or the Maryknoll Society membership do to help you and Roy walk back from the brink?'

I could sense Doc's frustration when he acknowledged there wasn't much anyone could do. An ad hoc 'Conciliation Committee' of Maryknollers and former superiors had failed to come up with an equitable solution.

A month ago I had asked Doc about Roy's monthly allowance and health coverage. He assured me Maryknoll would continue to take care of him. Roy could do his advocacy work, but could no longer identify himself as a priest and Maryknoller.

This is Maryknoll's reality: a missionary compelled by conscience, a superior general constrained by canon law, and a community trying to find some way to show Christ's compassion to their brother as they do to the poor.

Our community gathered May 26 to celebrate the Eucharist and pray for God to guide us through this time of ambiguity. We heard in the Acts of the Apostles how the early church confronted and solved very controversial issues with joy and trust in the Holy Spirit. Then two young men stepped forward, placed their hands on the Book of the Gospels held by our superior general, and in the presence of the community took their oath to Maryknoll.

[Maryknoll Fr. Joe Veneroso is author of *Mirrors of Grace: The Spirit and Spiritualities of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers* (Orbis, 2011).]

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