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Bourgeois awaits word from Rome

by Tom Roberts



Roy Bourgeois (CNS/Paul Haring)

Bourgeois was notified Oct. 21 by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that he had 30 days in which to recant his position or be excommunicated. Two weeks after receiving the notice, he responded, saying that he could not recant what he considered a matter of justice and conscience. At press time, he said he was still awaiting final word from the Vatican.

Bourgeois, a priest for 36 years, is known primarily as the founder of SOA Watch, a group that began staging annual protests at the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., in 1990. The year before in El Salvador, six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter had been assassinated by troops that had been trained at the school. Scores of other Latin American military personnel involved in egregious human rights abuses have also been trained at the school, which was originally located in Panama.

Following years of critical publicity and attempts to close the school, its name was changed in 2001 to the

Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

This year's protest at the gates of Fort Benning was scheduled for Nov. 21-23.

In recent years, Bourgeois included in the list of causes for which he advocated opposition to the ban on women's ordination, an issue he considered a matter of injustice within the church.

His activism in that regard culminated in August when he accepted an invitation to participate in an ordination ceremony in Lexington, Ky., for Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a longtime peace activist who was once arrested for performing civil disobedience at Fort Benning, and a longtime proponent of women's ordination.

Sevre-Duszynska, the sixth U.S. woman ordained this year as a part of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement, made national news as early as 1998 when she interrupted an ordination ceremony at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Lexington and asked for ordination. "I am called by the Holy Spirit to present myself for ordination," she said.

It was that call that Bourgeois said he had heard described by a number of women that convinced him that women were being wrongly excluded from the sacrament of ordination.

In his response to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Bourgeois wrote: "When I was a young man in the military, I felt God was calling me to the priesthood. I entered Maryknoll and was ordained in 1972.

"Over the years I have met a number of women in our church who, like me, feel called by God to the priesthood. You, our church leaders at the Vatican, tell us that women cannot be ordained."

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He argues that the church's position "does not stand up to scrutiny" and cites a Pontifical Biblical Commission report of 1976 that he claims "supports the research of scripture scholars, canon lawyers and many faithful Catholics who have studied and pondered the scriptures and have concluded that there is no justification in the Bible for excluding women from the priesthood."



He argued that the current leadership "implies our loving

and all-powerful God, creator of heaven and earth, somehow cannot empower a woman to be a priest."

"Who are we, as men, to say to women, 'Our call is valid, but yours is not'? Who are we to tamper with God's call?" he asked.

Bourgeois acknowledged when he made the decision to concelebrate the Mass at the ordination that he knew the penalty could be severe. Following an earlier ordination of women, a Vatican official had explained that persons directly involved in such a ceremony excommunicated themselves automatically with no possibility of appeal. "The only recourse is repentance," the official said.

Bourgeois said he hopes that should the next response from Rome confirm his worst fears, that he is excommunicated, that he would be allowed 15 minutes with Pope Benedict XVI and with Cardinal William Levada, head of the congregation on doctrine, to explain his position.

His future status with Maryknoll remains unclear. A spokesperson for the order has said he will remain a member, though unable to function as a priest, unless the Vatican imposes a further punishment that would prohibit his membership.

As scrutiny goes, however, Bourgeois said he has already placed himself under the most wrenching process of judgment, that of his 95-year-old father, Roy Sr. Once he had drafted his response to the Vatican, Bourgeois said, he drove to tiny Lutchter, La., and his childhood home, where his father still lives. In an emotional meeting with his family, including his brother and two sisters, the elder Bourgeois, a lifelong, devout Catholic who still attends daily Mass, gave his son his blessing.

When asked about the controversy, Bourgeois recalled, his father said: "God brought Roy back from the war in Vietnam. God took care of Roy in his mission work in Bolivia and El Salvador, and God is going to take care of Roy now. Roy is doing the right thing by following his conscience, and I support him."

Bourgeois told *NCR* in a Nov. 17 interview, "When I received his blessing and the blessing of my family, I felt a great peace. ... And I've felt peaceful ever since I came back from Louisiana."

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