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8th Day Center for Justice pressured over women's ordination

by Joshua J. McElwee



Logo from the 8th Day Center web site

The 8th Day Center for Justice, long a staple of Catholic social justice activism in the Chicago area, is facing pressure from Cardinal Francis George because of a Sept. 18 event that featured a screening of the film *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican* and a talk by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois.

Pink Smoke is a documentary expressing support for women's ordination in the Roman Catholic church. Bourgeois is currently under threat of removal from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers if he does not recant his own support of women's ordination.

NCR has learned that heads of religious orders associated with the center, which is supported by 39 orders of religious men and women, received letters from George several days before the event.

Two people who read the letter, dated Sept. 12, described its contents to *NCR*. Both said the letter mentioned that George stated the event could lead to scandal and confusion among the faithful over the

church's teaching on ordination and that he asked the leaders to remove their congregations' support of the event.

In what seems to be a related move, Sacred Heart Fr. Bob Bossie, who has worked at the center for more than 30 years, has been suspended indefinitely from his work there by his provincial.

In a press statement this morning, the 8th Day Center stated that "many" of its sponsoring congregations had received letters from George. The center emphasized that it had hosted the film viewing, not the affiliated congregations.

"In response to [the] 'Pink Smoke' event, the leadership of many of 8th Day's sponsoring congregations received a letter from Cardinal George regarding their assumed sponsorship of 'Pink Smoke,' " according to the center's statement. "This was a misunderstanding. 8th Day member congregations were not sponsors of this event."

"We recognize the cardinal's concerns, and pray that some common ground for dialogue can be found in our mutual love for our church," the statement continues. "8th Day is committed to continue to create a safe space for dialogue about the primacy of conscience deeply rooted in our love for the church and all the people of God."

The 8th Day Center, founded in 1974, invites religious congregations to become members of the organization by donating money, or by sending staff members to work at the office. Eight congregations, considered "sponsoring members" by the center, are represented by individual staff persons in Chicago.

Sr. Kathleen Desautels, who is a member of the Sisters of Providence of St.-Mary-of-the-Woods and represents that congregation as a staff member at the center, said in a phone interview that George had sent letters to at least the eight "sponsoring member" congregations

In response, she said, the center's coordinating council, which acts as a board for the organization and is made up of representatives from the eight sponsoring congregations and a number of the other 31 that support the center, sent a letter to George Sept. 21 asking to discuss his concerns regarding its leadership decisions.

A spokesperson for the Chicago archdiocese said yesterday they could not confirm George's letter to the heads of congregations associated with the center, and said it may fall into the category of "personal correspondence," which is not generally shared with archdiocesan staff.

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In a letter made available to the media regarding his status with the center, Bossie said his suspension came after George contacted Sacred Heart Fr. Tom Cassidy, head of the U.S. province of the priests of the Sacred Heart, regarding the Sept. 18 event.

"Following being contacted by Cardinal George of Chicago, the provincial council of the Priests of the Sacred Heart has suspended for six months their sponsorship of the 8th Day Center for Justice and the presence of Bob Bossie," reads Bossie's statement. "After six months, the council will review their decision."

In a similar statement, a spokesperson for the priests of the Sacred Heart confirmed Bossie's suspension from the center for an "indefinite period of time," but did not relate it to the showing of the film.

Through e-mails with others familiar with his suspension, Bossie said he would prefer not to speak publicly as he wishes to have more conversation with Cassidy and is also focusing much of his energy on taking care of his brother, who recently had open-heart surgery.

Desautels said that beyond the loss of Bossie on the staff, the Sacred Heart congregation has suspended its funding, which she estimated to total some \$14,000 a year for the social justice organization.

That loss of funding, Desautels said, is "going to be very hurtful to us" as it is "one of our largest yearly gifts."

Desautels, who has been on staff with the organization for over 25 years, also said that while the center did wish to promote discussion with its showing of "Pink Smoke," it hadn't organized the event specifically to promote women's ordination.

In fact, she said, before the viewing of the movie, a center staff member read aloud the official church teaching regarding women's ordination from the catechism in order to "allay whatever possible confusion."

Bourgeois has asked Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, a noted canon lawyer, to fight his removal by arguing for his right to express his conscience.

While Desautels expressed hope that "something good will come" from 8th Day Center's future discussions with George, she also said the situation raises larger questions on the freedom of people to follow their conscience regarding church teachings.

"This situation is not about Roy or even about women's ordination," said Desautels. "It's about freedom of conscience and the scandal of demanding silence on topics such as the equality of women in the church and the possibility of ordination for those women who so desire it."

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