

Bourgeois has long drawn inspiration from women

Linda Cooper James Hodge | Dec. 23, 2008



Humbled and privileged. That's how Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois feels

as he waits for the Vatican to excommunicate him.

Humbled by the torrent of support he's received after refusing to disavow his belief that God calls women to the priesthood.

Privileged to be a small voice for women inside what he sometimes calls the clerical 'boys' club.'

Last week, as his phone rang virtually nonstop and his mailbox overflowed, he learned that 113 Catholic women religious went public with their support, sending a pointed petition to the Vatican. In the petition, Dominican Sr. Donna Quinn, one of the coordinators of the National Coalition of American Nuns, said that the 'medieval punishment of excommunication' will only embarrass the church and further fuel 'anger and resentment among the U.S. faithful.'

But while he may be the eye of the storm at the moment, Bourgeois is acutely aware he's not the storm: the maelstrom of collective pain women have endured at the hands of the church.

Hardly a day passes that a phone call or a letter doesn't bring tears to his eyes. 'I never knew just how deeply women have been hurt by the church. And after hearing from so many women, I'm no longer comfortable being part of an institution that excludes them.'

Over and over again, they tell him of their struggles with faith, of the anguish of sexual abuse, of profound feelings of dejection. And of a rising anger.

'Women have such gifts, such compassion, such wisdom, which we need if the church is to be vibrant,' Bourgeois said. He believes it's unconscionable for the hierarchy to reject their call, especially when churches are being closed and the number of priests is constantly shrinking.

Some 'like a woman who wrote him about being sexually abused by a bishop' are livid that the church, while finding women unworthy for ordination, protects pedophile priests and never threatens to excommunicate them.

Many are also incensed that the Vatican would so quickly take drastic action against Bourgeois, whom Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister describes as someone who "has given his life for the Gospel, been one of the church's most public witnesses for human rights."

Bourgeois has done several stints in federal prison protesting the U.S. Army School of the Americas, which has trained dictators, assassins and death-squad leaders across Latin America.

While he has appreciated letters that thanked him for speaking out for women who say they have no voice, Bourgeois is careful to make clear that he is not trying to speak for women, but to stand in solidarity with them.

His participation in the August ordination ceremony of Janice Sevre-Duszynska, which prompted the Vatican's action, is not the first time Bourgeois has clashed with church officials over the issue. In 1990, he incurred the ire of Archbishop John Roach of the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese for allowing three women to celebrate Mass with him. Ten years later, while being interviewed on Vatican radio about the School of the Americas, he raised the issue of women's ordination, saying men have had a monopoly on church power for 2,000 years and it was time to give women a chance. The interview came to an abrupt halt, and recorded music was piped in to fill the remaining minutes of the program.

Of all the reasons women are now standing in solidarity with Bourgeois, perhaps the most fundamental is that he values women and is quick to acknowledge that he's indebted to them for moving him in directions he might not have gone. The first to "stretch" him were his mother and two sisters.

"My mother was strong, assertive, full of passion," he said. "She spoke her mind, even to the parish priest. Like Rosa Parks, she wouldn't sit in the back of the bus."

His sisters, Ann and Janet, while very supportive, give him reality checks and make him aware of the toll his actions sometimes have on the family. "And Ann worked at a rectory for 20 years. She knows how insensitive we can be, how bossy."

Coming from a large Cajun family, Bourgeois had always wanted a big family of his own, and before entering Maryknoll's seminary in 1966, he was romantically involved several times and engaged twice.

As a Naval officer in Vietnam, he fell in love with a Vietnamese woman named Huong who helped him understand her culture and the ways in which U.S. soldiers were insensitive to her countrymen. It was while dating her that he worked at an orphanage with a French missionary. The children, many of them amputees maimed by shrapnel or scarred by napalm, sowed the seeds of his disillusionment and led him to become a missionary and work with the poor.

After his ordination, Maryknoll sent him to Bolivia where dictator Hugo Banzer, an SOA graduate, had seized power. There, he built a health clinic and started a women's knitting cooperative before being expelled from the country for protesting the torture of political prisoners.

Back in the States, he lived at a Catholic Worker house in Chicago and studied how Dorothy Day served the poor while working to change the system that impoverished them.

At the Catholic Worker, Bourgeois was invigorated by women activists Kathy Kelly, Renny Golden, Chris Inerra and others working to stop U.S. aid to El Salvador after Archbishop Oscar Romero and four U.S. churchwomen were murdered. Two of them, Maryknoll Srs. Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, were his friends, and their pictures still hang on his wall. The fact that they were killed by SOA graduates only fueled his drive to close the school.

In the early days of the movement, no one influenced him more than Carol Richardson, an ordained Methodist minister with Witness for Peace. She challenged Bourgeois to expand the movement by creating advisory committees.

Despite his initial resistance, Richardson said, Bourgeois agreed and began fostering "an egalitarian spirit that allowed people to speak their minds."

Bourgeois remembers well how the women on the committees confronted him and other men for "dominating meetings, not listening well and putting too many males on the podium. They brought about a real balance and equality."

Women have been the backbone of the movement, Bourgeois said, convincing him that "if we had women priests, there would have been no church silence on the Iraq war or on the sex-abuse scandals."

Sevre-Duszynska is one of many women who have gone to prison protesting the SOA. Bourgeois, who accepted her invitation to participate in her ordination, said that she "is among those who say, "This is my church, I'm not leaving it, I'm staying to reform it." "

Bourgeois understands all too well why women leave the church. His friend Margaret Knapke, a former teacher at a Catholic college involved with justice issues in Latin America, "just got fed up with the sexism. We're losing some of the best and the brightest."

There is no biblical justification for excluding women, Bourgeois said. "And no matter how hard we may try to justify discrimination, in the end, it is always wrong."

"I feel blessed for knowing many deeply spiritual women, and feel sad that so many priests do not have women friends. They feel they have to keep women at a distance. Some have this "Adam and Eve" notion that women are the temptress, the feared one, the cause of Adam's sin."

Bourgeois now feels the best role he can play is to encourage his fellow priests to break their silence on the women issue. "Many tell me they speak in favor of women's ordination around trusted friends, but not publicly because it would put their positions or ministries at risk. But at some point, silence becomes complicity."

Whether he is excommunicated or not, Bourgeois, now 70, says he'll have no regrets. "What I'm going through or may go through doesn't compare to what women have gone through."

"And on the Last Day, I don't think I'll be judged by how well I followed canon law."

Linda Cooper and James Hodge are the authors of Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas.

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