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Former Maryknoll head decries Vatican interference in Bourgeois case

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 20, 2012
Roy Bourgeois

A former head of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers has expressed support for Roy Bourgeois, saying the longtime peace activist and priest has a "deep love for the church" and his dismissal from the order by the Vatican represents meddling in Maryknoll's affairs.

In his first statement since the dismissal, Bourgeois said Tuesday, "The Vatican and Maryknoll can dismiss me, but they cannot dismiss the issue of gender equality in the Catholic Church."

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has "interfered with the integrity of the society," said Maryknoll Fr. John Sivalon, who served as the order's superior general from 2002 to 2008.

"It makes it very hard to consider how we talk about mission and visioning for the future and being open to the Spirit, when in fact we're being dictated to that this is what we need to follow," Sivalon told *NCR* Tuesday. "And so I think there is a question about the society itself and how the integrity of the society has been affected by this."

The Vatican congregation dismissed Bourgeois, a member of Maryknoll for 45 years who had come under scrutiny for his support of women's ordination, from the order in October, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers announced [1] in a press release Monday.

In his statement responding to his dismissal, Bourgeois said his expulsion from Maryknoll "is very difficult and painful."

"When there is an injustice, silence is the voice of complicity. My conscience compelled me to break my silence and address the sin of sexism in my Church," Bourgeois writes in the statement, which was posted Tuesday afternoon at the website [2] of the Women's Ordination Conference.

"My only regret is that it took me so long to confront the issue of male power and domination in the Catholic Church," Bourgeois wrote.

Sivalon said Bourgeois supports women's ordination "out of a very deep love for the church."

"That love for the church just is expressed in his belief that the hierarchical part of the church is becoming less and less relevant in the world and to changes in the world," he said. "It's probably with profound sadness that he himself looks upon how that hierarchy has moved away. I think it's just a sign of his love that he has taken the position."

Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, a canon lawyer acting on Bourgeois' behalf, said Monday neither he nor Bourgeois was aware of the full scope of the Vatican's move until seeing the press release from Maryknoll on the matter.

Maryknoll's membership was first informed in the same press release, and the society has not made available the letter from the Vatican congregation dismissing Bourgeois, Sivalon said.

Requests for comment on the matter Tuesday were not immediately returned by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers.

Bourgeois first learned of the news Monday afternoon in a phone call from a Maryknoll priest who had called to ask Bourgeois to come up to the order's New York headquarters for a meeting, Doyle said.

Bourgeois asked the priest the purpose of the meeting, and Doyle said the priest replied that the order had received a letter from the Vatican congregation dismissing Bourgeois both from the order and the priesthood.

Bourgeois then asked if the society would hold off on making an announcement about the matter until he could meet with them and see a copy of the letter, Doyle said. They refused.

"Roy did not see the content of this news release until I printed a copy up and sent it to him by fax," Doyle said.

The Vatican's removal of Bourgeois, Sivalon said, "raises questions about how open the society can be to explain avenues of being in mission in different ways."

Prior to the congregation's dismissal of the priest, "the society was moving toward a much more Kingdom-centered, Reign of God-centered kind of understanding of its mission and service to that, and this raises questions about it," said the former superior general.

"My own position would be of support for women's ordination and opening up ministry to others," Sivalon said, "and I think it would be the position of probably many in leadership in Maryknoll."

"I think all of us, looking at what's happening in the church today, think that it's just becoming less and less relevant and less and less open to the possibility that the Spirit is speaking through the world and speaking through others," Sivalon said. "I think people that know Roy would still look upon him as a priest and respect him as a priest, no matter what the congregation has done."

Bourgeois' role in Maryknoll had been in question since his presence at the ordination of Roman Catholic Womanpriest Janice Sevre-Duszynska in August 2008.

Shortly after that ordination, Bourgeois was notified by the Vatican congregation that he had incurred a *latae sententiae*, or automatic, excommunication for his participation at the event.

Maryknoll asked Bourgeois to publicly recant his support of women's ordination, telling the priest in a March 2011 letter he faced laicization and removal from the order if he did not comply.

In a series of letters and interviews since then, Bourgeois has said he could not comply with the request for reasons of conscience.

Maryknoll's leadership took a vote on removing Bourgeois from the order in the spring [3]. While the order would confirm at the time that a vote had taken place, it would not comment on its outcome.

Doyle told *NCR* at the time that Maryknoll Fr. Mike Duggan, the U.S. regional superior of the order, informed

Bourgeois of the vote, which was a split decision. Doyle said Duggan told him two council members voted in favor of dismissal and three members abstained.

Monday's statement from Maryknoll states that Bourgeois' "disobedience and preaching against the teaching of the Catholic Church about women's ordination led to his excommunication, dismissal and laicization."

"With this parting, the Maryknoll Society warmly thanks Roy Bourgeois for his service to mission and all members wish him well in his personal life," the statement concludes. "In the spirit of equity and charity, Maryknoll will assist Mr. Bourgeois with this transition."

Doyle said he and Bourgeois would discuss the possibilities for appeal of the decision once they are able to see a copy of the letter from the Vatican congregation.

"As Catholics, we profess that God created men and women of equal worth and dignity," Bourgeois wrote in his statement Tuesday.

"As priests, we profess that the call to the priesthood comes from God, only God. Who are we, as men, to say that our call from God is authentic, but God's call to women is not? The exclusion of women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, our Church and our loving God who calls both men and women to be priests."

Several canon lawyers contacted by *NCR* for background on the issues surrounding dismissal of a priest from a religious order said it is unclear how the Vatican congregation was able to act on the matter. See: *Canon lawyers: Vatican's role ambiguous in Bourgeois' removal [4]* for more.

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