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Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith censors Irish Redemptorist for speaking out

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NCR Today

News from Ireland tells of yet another priest being censored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for speaking out against church teachings on homosexuality, contraception, women's ordination and other issues. Fr. Tony Flannery is a 66-year-old Redemptorist priest and one of the founders of the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP), which represents more than 850 priests in Ireland. According to the ACP website:

Fr Flannery will be allowed back into ministry only if he writes, signs and publishes an article (pre-approved by the CDF) accepting the Catholic Church can never ordain women to the priesthood and accepting all Church stances on contraception, homosexuality, and the refusal of the sacraments to people in second relationships.

"I could not possibly put my name to such an article without impugning my own integrity and conscience," he said today. "The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is orchestrating all this while refusing to communicate with me. I have had no direct communication with them. I have never been given an opportunity to meet my accusers, or to understand why this action is being taken against me when I've raised the same issues, consistently, for decades."

In an article written by Flannery for the *Irish Times*, he states, "to give up on freedom of thought, freedom of speech and most especially freedom of conscience is too high a price for me to pay to be allowed minister in today's church."

As the news was breaking, Jesuit Fr. James Martin of *America* magazine provided some thoughtful context, explaining the difficult position for Flannery as a Redemptorist.

The conflict for the member of the religious order, then, comes down to a conflict between two sacred matters: one's conscience and one's vows, or, as my moral theology once professor put it, between justice and fidelity. Sometimes (Thomas Merton, OCSO, John Courtney Murray, SJ, Yves Congar, OP) the choice is for fidelity, and the person assents to his or her silencing, because they believe that God will work through their vows of obedience? In other cases (Roy Bourgeois and many others), the choice is for justice, because they believe that God is calling them through their conscience to speak out. Often, in cases where the silencing is not adhered to, and thus the vow of obedience is broken, the priest is dismissed from the religious order and, in some rare cases, excommunicated.

Justice or fidelity? Conscience or obedience? Does one trump the other? As with Roy Bourgeois, Flannery, who has been a Redemptorist for more than 40 years, is bound to have his share of support and opposition. It is one thing to cheer or jeer on the sidelines, but if we had to make this difficult decision, what would we do?

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