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Longtime peace activist removed from ministry after concelebrating Mass with woman priest

Brian Roewe | Mar. 28, 2014

A longtime peace and human rights activist arrested countless times, Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada has been removed from public ministry for concelebrating Mass with a woman priest in 2011.

The letter removing the 76-year-old's public priestly faculties -- a copy of which *NCR* obtained March 21 -- came from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which reviewed documentation related to the Nov. 22, 2011, liturgy Zawada concelebrated with Roman Catholic Womanpriest Janice Sevre-Duszynska.

"Having carefully examined the acts of the case, and the *vota* of the former Minister General and the Rev. Zawada's Provincial Superior, this Dicastery has decided to impose on Rev. Jerome Zawada, OFM, a life of prayer and penance to be lived within the *Queen of Peace Friary* in Burlington, Wisconsin," the letter states.

In addition, Zawada cannot present himself in public as a priest or celebrate the sacraments publicly; however, he can concelebrate Mass with other friars at the friary and in private.

"I don't mind the prayer part," Zawada told *NCR* Monday, "but when they called, when they say that I need to be spending time in penance, well, I'm not going to do penance for my convictions and the convictions of so many others, too."

Fr. John Puodziunas, provincial minister of the Franciscan Friars of the Assumption BVM Province, said he has not yet discussed the letter with Zawada but plans to in the coming weeks. He confirmed the letter removes him from his public priestly ministry but said it hasn't been decided how it will restrict his movement outside the friary. At the same time, he said, "Friaries are not jails."

"I can't imagine us approaching it from a perspective that this would be, 'He's restricted, he cannot leave the friary' type of thing," Puodziunas told *NCR*. "I think the letter is pretty clear that he's not to act publicly as a priest, which he hasn't done in years anyway."

Zawada has not held a parish or chaplain assignment for years, Puodziunas added, and he agreed following the 2011 liturgy not to act publicly as a priest until the matter received clarity. In June, Zawada will celebrate the 50th anniversary of his ordination.

Speaking from the Wisconsin friary, Zawada said the letter "sent me for a loop," even though he anticipated a response at some point. "But nothing has changed in terms of my own commitment and belief" concerning women's ordination, he said, adding that they have only deepened.

"I do feel strongly in support of women priests and married priests in the Catholic church," he said, adding that he felt compelled to be transparent with his views and that he has learned much from ministers of different denominations.

"I know that they don't think I observe obedience very well through these years, but I have to use my conscience. I have to listen to other people who also speak the voice of God," he said.

Despite receiving the letter from the doctrinal congregation, the still-pugnacious priest took comfort from the pope's supposed remarks [1] in June to the Latin American Conference of Religious, that should such a dispatch come, "Do not worry. Explain whatever you have to explain, but move forward."

"Even Pope Francis told Latin American religious not to worry about the congregation. Well, why should I worry, then?" Zawada asked.

As for what he will do next, Zawada said he plans to take it step by step and would like to visit his family in Indiana during Holy Week. From there, he said he feels "a strong hunger" toward migrants, prisoners and others on the bottom rung of the social ladder -- all groups he also considers "my family."

"Every single one of my dreams at night are dreams about living and sharing life with the poor, with people who are destitute, and I sense I have a strong calling for that," he said.

"I feel ready to move on," he said. "I want to move on and be able to take some risks. And I have to and I'm called to do so."

Zawada received his letter, dated Feb. 19, in early March through Puodziunas, who also sent him a letter. The Vatican letter is addressed to Franciscan Fr. Michael Anthony Perry, an American and the minister general of the Order of Friars Minor, and is signed by Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia, an official with the doctrinal congregation.

The concelebration in question [2] occurred during the 2011 SOA Watch, the annual protest of the U.S. Army School of the Americas, now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Zawada told *NCR* he also concelebrated with Sevre-Duszynska, a close friend and fellow activist, at the previous year's protest but has not done so since, believing the concept of concelebration singles out ordained clergy and excludes the rest of the worshiping community. He told *NCR* in November 2011 that the liturgy offered him an opportunity to follow his conscience and address injustices he saw in the clergy structure.

Sevre-Duszynska was ordained in August 2008 a priest in the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests. The participation of Roy Bourgeois in that ceremony led to his excommunication and eventual dismissal [3] in November 2012 from the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers. The next month, Jesuit Fr. Bill Brennan of Milwaukee had his priestly ministries removed [4] by Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listeki for also participating in a liturgy with Sevre-Duszynska at SOA Watch.

"They're holy men," Sevre-Duszynska told *NCR*. "They're men with the strength and grace that Jesus had, speaking truth to power. And I'm grateful they're my friends."

She said she was saddened by the ruling on Zawada, whom she considers a mentor, but predicted it would not stop the ministry of a man "whose voice is one that gives direction to so many."

Zawada, who turns 77 next month and suffers from neuropathy and some mild memory issues, said he lacks the energy to take a larger role in the women's ordination movement, though he will openly discuss his beliefs when people approach him or if it comes up in the context of peace and justice issues.

The latter have largely served as the priest's primary dwelling the past four decades.

His actions at SOA Watch have placed him in the crosshairs of not only the Vatican but the federal government. He estimates he has been arrested there five times, twice serving six-month prison sentences for trespassing.

He participated in the 1988 Missouri Peace Planting, where protesters visited nuclear missile silos in the state. Zawada, who celebrated Mass atop a missile lid and also broke a ban-and-bar letter by visiting a silo for the fifth time, was convicted of several misdemeanors and served a 25-month prison sentence. In 1991, he received an additional five and a half months after he was arrested for protesting the Gulf War while on probation.

More recently, he joined 22 other people in July [5] in crossing the property line of a nuclear weapons facility under construction in Kansas City, Mo., and was among the "Creech 14" arrested in 2009 at Creech Air Force Base outside Las Vegas after peacefully protesting the use of drones. He remains under a two-year probation sentence for trespassing with six others at Naval Base Kitsap in Washington state, where Trident submarines carrying nuclear missiles reside.

He has also advocated for migrants' rights and immigration reform, making frequent trips to the U.S.-Mexico border.

In all, Zawada has served nearly five and a half years in prison. In an August 2006 interview with the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, he estimated he has been arrested "well over a hundred times maybe, maybe two hundred times," admitting he has lost count.

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