

8-9-08 - Peace activist priest assists at women's ordination ceremony
By TOM ROBERTS, NCR staff, National Catholic Reporter

Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, long associated with the cause of Christian non-violence and attempts to close the international school for military training at Fort Benning, Ga., today staked his conscience to a different cause: the ordination of women in the Catholic church.

Bourgeois was a concelebrant and homilist at the ordination of Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a longtime peace activist and advocate of women's ordination. The ordination occurred Aug. 9 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, Ky.

In an interview Aug. 7, two days before the ordination, Bourgeois told NCR that he had thought long and hard about participating after receiving an invitation to the ceremony. "I consulted a lot of friends, I've done a lot of discernment, spoken with a lot of women friends. I felt in conscience -- this matter of conscience keeps coming up and I don't know what other word to use -- if I didn't attend her ordination, I would have to stop addressing this issue as I do" in speaking engagements at parishes and other Catholic venues around the country.

Though Bourgeois is best known for leading a movement to oppose the training of foreign troops at what once was known as the School of the Americas, he has also long maintained, as a matter of conscience, that women should be ordained. The SOA watch annually draws tens of thousands to Ft. Benning in November for a weekend of teach-ins and demonstrations. The school's official name was changed in 2001 to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

When questioned, Bourgeois said he knew there could be "serious implications" if he openly participated in a women's ordination ceremony. While other priests may have attended other women's ordination ceremonies incognito, a spokesperson for the Women's Ordination Conference said Bourgeois was the only active male priest to openly participate in such an event.

"For me it seems very right," he said in the interview. "I would have a problem sleeping at night in the future if I didn't put my body where my words are."

In considering the implications, he said, "I don't know how I could continue to be silent in the church, this is such a big issue for me.

"Over the years and listening to women friends -- if one listens, just shuts up and listens to their stories, their faith journey and, in some cases, their call by God to ordination to the priesthood in the Catholic church -- there is a problem for us guys in the church. What are we saying? God is calling us but not you? This is heresy. We're tampering with the sacred here."

He also speaks about exclusion of women from ordination as discrimination. “We cannot justify discrimination no matter how hard the bishops may try. In the end, it is wrong. It is a sin. That’s how I see it and that’s why I am going to be there Saturday.”

He said he had not spoken to any other media or to his religious superiors before the event.

However, he has been outspoken about the issue for some time. In 1998, as he noted in his homily, he wrote a letter to the rest of his community in which he called sexism a sin. “As people of faith,” he wrote, “we profess that God is all powerful and the source of life. Yet, when it comes to women being ordained, it seems that opponents are saying that this same God somehow can not empower a woman to be a priest. Suddenly, we as men believe God becomes powerless when women approach the altar to celebrate Mass.”

(Tom Roberts is NCR editor at large and news director.)