

9-5-08 - Vatican may discipline Maryknoll priest over woman's 'ordination'

Gary Stern, The Journal News (NY)

A high-profile Maryknoll priest is standing by his decision to take part in a woman's priestly "ordination" ceremony despite being reprimanded by his Ossining-based Catholic community and facing possible disciplinary action by the Vatican.

The Rev. Roy Bourgeois has become a prominent figure for his long-time protests against the School of the Americas, a U.S. Army operation at Fort Benning, Ga., that trains Latin American soldiers. An annual demonstration organized by Bourgeois has in recent years drawn upward of 20,000 people who contend the school is linked to human rights abuses in numerous countries.

But Bourgeois was called to Ossining on Aug. 18 by Maryknoll's leadership to discuss his involvement 10 days earlier in an "ordination" ceremony for a female friend in Lexington, Ky. Bourgeois gave the liturgy, even though the Vatican has threatened excommunication for those who participate in such ceremonies.

Maryknoll's leadership issued a canonical warning to Bourgeois, informing him that he had violated church law, and forwarded its findings to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for review. The congregation could let stand Maryknoll's warning or call for further discipline against Bourgeois.

Bourgeois, 69, told The Journal News this week that the Catholic Church's all-male priesthood is blatantly discriminatory and that taking a stand for women's ordination is akin to fighting injustice in other areas.

"As a Catholic priest - and this is important - I cannot possibly speak out about the injustice of the war in Iraq, about the injustice of the School of the Americas and the suffering it causes, and at the same time be silent about this injustice in my church," he said. "I belong to a huge faith community where women are excluded, and I have a responsibility to address this."

Bourgeois realizes that he may pay a heavy price.

"Maryknoll is my family," he said. "I love Maryknoll. This is my family. It would be very, very sad, very, very painful, to be kicked out of the Catholic Church for this."

He said that his conscience would continue to compel him to speak out for women's ordination.

"What does one do when you see discrimination?" he said. "I have no invitations or plans to attend other ordinations. But, in conscience, I must speak out on this issue. I must let fellow Catholics know that I am among the many in the Catholic Church we believe that women can be ordained."

Maryknoll, in a brief, initial statement, said its leadership and Bourgeois would be "more involved in collective discernment over issues of justice, including the role of women in the Church."

Later, Maryknoll sought to distance itself further from Bourgeois' actions by adding: "We believe our supporters will understand that this was a case of one member acting as an individual. Leadership of the Society was not consulted by Father Bourgeois prior to the event, nor would they have condoned his participation."

The group that organized the ceremony, Roman Catholic Womenpriests, said Bourgeois is the first active Catholic priest to participate in the "ordination" of a woman.

Such ceremonies are not recognized by the Catholic Church, which holds that only men can be priests because all of Jesus' apostles were men. In May, the Vatican declared that women who attempt "ordination" and any bishop who participates would be subject to automatic excommunication.

It remains unclear how Bourgeois' predicament will affect support for his work or for Maryknoll, the missionary community that has been working with the poor and oppressed around the world for nearly a century.

George Weigel, a Catholic theologian often described as a "neo-conservative," said Bourgeois' actions should affect Catholic support for his political work.

"It should have an effect, because it demonstrates that Father Bourgeois is as irresponsible theologically as he is politically," he said. "But will that make any difference to the people who think the School of the Americas is a kindergarten for concentration camp guards? No. They, too, are beyond reason and evidence."

Weigel said he expected Maryknoll to pay little heed.

"Given the general theological and political drift at Maryknoll these past several decades, there is little reason to expect that very much effective discipline will follow this warning," he said.

John Allen is a leading Catholic analyst who writes for National Catholic Reporter, or NCR, a weekly that first reported Bourgeois' involvement in the "ordination" ceremony. He said many people who support Bourgeois' political work - including Maryknoll's own priests, nuns and lay missionaries - probably share his desire to see women become eligible for the priesthood.

"Maryknoll certainly has a profile in Catholic circles as one of the more progressive religious orders in the church, particularly because of its commitment to peace and justice issues," Allen said. "The practical reality is that most Maryknollers are probably in the liberal camp on internal church issues, as well, and many would probably be sympathetic to Bourgeois' view on women's ordination.

"At the same time, Maryknoll will not engage in open defiance of the Vatican, so my sense - and you already see this happening - is that they will try to finesse the situation and keep Roy in the fold," Allen said.

Allen noted that other religious orders, namely the Jesuits, have seen members upset the Vatican and receive various forms of censorship.

"Typically, the Jesuits will defend those guys as much as they can and, in the end, accept church authority," he said.

Maryknoll spokeswoman Betsey Guest said that Maryknoll expects word from the Vatican "in the not too distant future" about Bourgeois.

"It's completely in the hands of the congregation," she said.

Bourgeois is a Louisiana native who fought in Vietnam with the Navy and received the Purple Heart. He was ordained a Maryknoll priest in 1972. He began protesting at Fort Benning after the infamous 1980 murder of four Catholic women, including two Maryknoll nuns, by Salvadoran soldiers who had been trained at Fort Benning.

His first organized demonstration in 1990 drew only 25 people. Today, his protests draw activists from many religious traditions.

Bourgeois' stand for women's ordination has received a lot of attention on Catholic blogs, drawing passionate comments on the controversial subject of women's ordination.

Greg Kandra, a Catholic deacon serving in the Diocese of Brooklyn who has followed the Bourgeois story on his blog, "The Deacon's Bench," said Catholics who take the most offense at Bourgeois' actions probably do not support his political activism.

"Those Catholics are more conservative, and closing the School of the Americas isn't high on their list of priorities," he said. "And the ones who ardently support Maryknoll's mission - those who are more progressive, more passionate about social justice issues - will probably continue to do so."

John Healey of Bronxville, a member of the Upper Room, a group of liberal Catholics with ties to the College of New Rochelle, agreed that many supporters of Bourgeois' political work probably favor women's ordination.

"I think that most people who support Maryknoll do so out of respect for their very good works and will be satisfied with whatever discipline Maryknoll imposes," he said.

Bridget Mary Meehan, a spokeswoman for Roman Catholic Womenpriests, praised Bourgeois for his "prophetic stance" linking social justice to justice for women in the church.

"No longer can church hierarchy ignore the burning question of justice for women in the church, the elephant in their own living room, while proclaiming justice and peace for the world," she said.