

Priest faces removal from Maryknoll for supporting ordination for women

WASHINGTON - The superior general of the Maryknoll order warned Father Roy Bourgeois that he will proceed under canon law to seek the priest's removal from the order and request that he be laicized unless he recants his belief that women should be ordained as Catholic priests.

Maryknoll Father Edward Dougherty, superior general of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, outlined the steps the order would follow under the direction of Vatican officials in a canonical warning sent to Father Bourgeois dated March 18.

The document gave Father Bourgeois 15 days after receiving the warning to respond. Father Bourgeois told Catholic News Service he received the correspondence March 29 and that he has until April 13 to respond.

A canonical warning informs a person of a violation of church law.

Church teaching holds that ordination to the diaconate and the priesthood is reserved for men and that the church has no authority to ordain women.

Mike Virgintino, manager of public relations and events for Maryknoll, told CNS March 30 Father Dougherty's action was taken at the direction of Vatican officials. He said the order has tried repeatedly since 2008 to seek reconciliation between Father Bourgeois and the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which handles affairs related to church teaching, without success.

Father Bourgeois' support for the ordination of women to the priesthood led to his excommunication "latae sententiae" - automatically - in November 2008.

Since providing the church's doctrinal congregation with an explanation of his belief prior to the excommunication, Father Bourgeois said he has not received any further correspondence from church officials.

The Maryknoll order said in a statement that it issued the order in accordance with church law "with much sadness."

"We are very saddened about this matter between our brother Roy and his relationship with the church," Father Dougherty said in the statement. "Maryknoll has presented Roy with a number of opportunities to openly communicate with the Vatican and move out from under his excommunication from the church. We have stood by Roy during this difficult time for him and his church, and we remain hopeful that the issues separating them can be reconciled."

In the canonical warning, Father Dougherty told Father Bourgeois that if he did not comply with the order to recant his belief, a second canonical warning would be issued. If Father Bourgeois continued to failed to comply with the order, Father Dougherty said he would "proceed with dismissal" from the Maryknoll congregation and include a request for laicization for the 72-year-old priest.

"Sufficient time has now passed for you to consider the gravity of the matter," the canonical warning said. "You are hereby asked one final time by the superior general and his council to publicly recant and accept the teaching of the church on this serious matter concerning priestly ordination and the explicit teaching of the church.

Father Bourgeois said he met with Father Dougherty, three members of the Maryknoll's leadership council and a canon lawyer representing the order March 18.

The discussion included reference to a recent letter from U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who wanted Father Bourgeois to recant his support for the ordination of women, Father Bourgeois told CNS.

“Maryknoll and the Vatican are requiring me to recant,” Father Bourgeois said. “In essence the Vatican is telling me I must lie. It goes against what I believe.”

Known for his 20-year campaign to close a U.S. Army school at Fort Benning, Ga., that trains Latin American soldiers, Father Bourgeois attracted the attention of his superiors and church officials in August 2008 when he participated in a reported ordination ceremony sponsored by Roman Catholic Womenpriests in Lexington, Ky. Despite a canonical warning from his order soon after the ceremony, the priest refused to recant and was automatically excommunicated three months later.

In various public venues since, Father Bourgeois has reiterated that he believed church teaching on ordination is wrong, that it failed to withstand scrutiny and that he would not recant.

Father Bourgeois said his support for the ordination of women to the priesthood is a matter of conscience.

He said he planned to seek a canon lawyer for assistance in preparing his response. He also said he hoped to meet with Cardinal Levada in Rome.

“I would love nothing more and see it as important to sit down with Cardinal William Levada, the prefect, even if it’s for 15 minutes, to look him in the eye and have a discussion on this,” he said. “I think it’s reasonable. As a priest for 38 years, I feel 15 minutes with someone who has the power to kick you out of Maryknoll, to laicize you, is important. I will ask that of the superior general to help that happen.”

Roman Catholic Womenpriests immediately opened a petition drive to support Father Bourgeois after the warning was made public by the priest, said Suzanne A. Thiel, the organization's president.

The organization is not recognized by the church. It has sponsored numerous ceremonies since 2002 involved the reported ordinations of women deacons, priests and bishops. The ceremonies have led to the excommunications of the women involved after they were asked by church officials to renounce their action and they declined.