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Catholic Priest Faces Excommunication

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

The [Vatican](#) has informed a Roman Catholic priest in the United States that he will be excommunicated next week for participating in a ceremony it considers illicit and invalid: the ordination of a woman as a priest.

The priest, the Rev. Roy Bourgeois, 69, has been a member of the Maryknoll religious order for 36 years. He said he was anguished at the thought of excommunication, but could not disavow his actions.

“Who are we as men to say that we are called by God to the ministry of priesthood, but women are not? That our call is valid, but theirs is not?” he said in an interview. “We profess as Catholics that the invitation to the priesthood comes from God, and it seems to me that we are tampering with the sacred.”

Father Bourgeois served as a missionary in Bolivia and El Salvador, and concerned by what he witnessed, returned to the United States and became nationally known as a peace advocate.

He lives in an apartment outside the gates of Fort Benning, Ga., where he leads an annual protest against the [United States Army](#) School of the Americas, which trains military personnel from Latin America. Last year, 17,000 people joined the protest.

In August, Father Bourgeois joined a ceremony in a Unitarian Universalist church in Lexington, Ky., in which a friend from the peace movement, Janice Sevre-Duszynska, claimed ordination as a Roman Catholic priest. Father Bourgeois gave the homily and laid hands on her.

He had known that excommunication was possible but said he thought it unlikely. His order summoned him to headquarters and gave him a warning but did not discipline him.

Then he received a letter dated Oct. 21 from the Vatican’s doctrinal watchdog, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, warning that if he did not recant, in writing, he would be excommunicated within 30 days.

“When I got the actual letter, I had to sit down,” he said. “I felt nauseous. I thought, this is serious stuff. The first thought that came to mind was, How am I going to explain this to my dad and my family?”

After weeks of prayer, Father Bourgeois informed the Vatican that he would not repent.

Ms. Sevre-Duszynska, a veteran agitator for women’s ordination, is the 35th American woman to claim ordination from an increasingly vocal group known as Roman Catholic Womenpriests.

She grew up in a Polish Catholic community in Milwaukee and grew enamored of a priest's work after her mother arranged for her to help a nun clean the priest's sacristy every week.

"I have felt called to the priesthood since my childhood," Ms. Sevre-Duszyńska said.

The Womenpriests group has been holding its own ordinations of women as priests, deacons and even bishops across North America and Europe, starting in 2002 with a ceremony on a boat on the Danube River. Some of the ceremonies in Europe were done in secret, so even Womenpriest leaders say they do not have a complete count.

The Vatican and local bishops have notified the women that they are automatically excommunicated. But Father Bourgeois is the first priest to face discipline for his involvement.

Leaders of the Womenpriests say that three bishops in good standing have performed ordinations in Europe. But they have pledged not to identify the bishops until their deaths.

[Pope John Paul II](#) reiterated the church's position in 1994 in an apostolic letter which said that because Jesus chose only male apostles, "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women."

A Roman Catholic nun who worked for the Archdiocese of St. Louis was removed from her position by her archbishop this year, and banned from receiving sacraments, after she attended a women's ordination ceremony.

Father Bourgeois said he would try to appeal the Vatican's decision. Excommunication, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is "the most severe ecclesiastical penalty." The person is forbidden to receive or administer sacraments.

On a practical level, Father Bourgeois also faces the loss of his benefits and the \$1,000 he receives monthly for living expenses. But, he said, "if I am without health care, I will be joining millions of people in the U.S. who don't have health care."

He has been at peace, he said, since he drove to his hometown in Louisiana and told his 95-year-old father, his 3 siblings and 13 nieces and nephews.

His father cried a little, Father Bourgeois recalled, then said: "God brought Roy back from the war in Vietnam, from his mission work in Bolivia and El Salvador, and God's going to take care of him now. I support Roy."

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