

# Why Women Should Be Priests

By Roy Bourgeois  
January 2015

*This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published online on 26 January 2015 by Taylor & Francis in International Studies in Catholic Education, as "The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Arguments for Teachers and Students in Catholic Schools to Consider – Part 2, the case for." Bourgeois' ISCE article is available for purchase online at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19422539.2014.998496#abstract> and is included in their March 2015 print issue, available at many Catholic university libraries. That same issue has an article by Sr. Catherine Joseph Droste, OP, which argues against the ordination of women.*

## Abstract

Vatican authority is being challenged as Roman Catholic women act upon their vocations to the priesthood, receive ordination, and openly serve their faith communities. Since 2002—when seven women were ordained by male Roman Catholic bishops—190 women have been ordained to the priesthood, including a dozen women bishops. Vatican officials dismiss their ordinations as "illicit," but many Catholics believe these women are ushering in a renaissance of the Church as a truly egalitarian faith community. In this paper, I explain why I believe women should be priests.

## Introduction

As a young man, I felt God calling me to be a Catholic priest; I was ordained in 1972. During my ministry I met many devout Catholic women who told me about their call by God to be priests. After much study and prayer, I came to the conclusion that excluding women from the priesthood defies both reason and faith.

In Section A. below, I summarize what I consider to be the most important arguments for ordaining women in the Catholic Church. These arguments concern: 1. dignity and equality, 2. vocation and ordination, and

3. primacy of conscience and prophetic obedience. In Section B., God is calling Women to be Priests: My Personal Story, I explain how I came to be in solidarity with women in our Church.

## **A. Arguments for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church**

### **Dignity and equality**

As Catholics, we are taught that both men and women are created equal "in the image of God" (Genesis 1: 27). Then, through baptism, "It is through faith that you are God's sons and daughters. . . . There is neither male nor female. In Christ Jesus you are all one" (Galatians 3: 26-28). Women and men are endowed equally with intellectual and moral capacity.

Nevertheless, throughout history women have been suppressed and demeaned as inferior. In a 1995 letter written for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Pope John Paul II stated: "Our ability to recognize [women's] dignity, in spite of historical conditioning, comes from the use of reason itself, which is able to understand the law of God written in the heart of every human being."<sup>1</sup>

Yet we often fail to be reasonable and dignity-minded; instead we *rationalize* unjust customs that serve our self-interests, including traditions denying gender equality.

There are structural reasons for the Church's inconsistent position on women's equality, too. As theologian Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, has pointed out: "Christianity took shape in the culture of the Roman Empire . . . . [Patriarchy] (rule of the father) is a pyramid-shaped arrangement where power is always in the hands of a dominant man or group of men. As the church grew and became established, its leaders adopted this pattern for its own internal life."<sup>2</sup>

Clearly this top-down, all-male clerical structure is still in place; when challenged, its guardians argue that people relegated to the bottom belong there. Not only are women denied access to the priesthood, nuns have been scolded for not taking direction from their male "superiors." In 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reminded U.S. nuns that only men can be "the Church's authentic teachers of faith and morals."<sup>3</sup>

## Vocation and ordination

By contrast, a 1976 report by the Pontifical Biblical Commission found no justification for prohibiting women from being priests. The 17-member Commission voted unanimously that “the New Testament does not settle in a clear way and once and for all whether women can be ordained priests.”<sup>4</sup> Five years later the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner stated: “I do not see either in the arguments used or in the formal teaching authority of the Church . . . a convincing or conclusive reason for assenting to . . . the Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith which seems to exclude the ordination of women in principle and for all time.”<sup>5</sup>

But the prohibition persists. In 1994 John Paul II addressed the issue of ordaining women in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone). He stated that Jesus chose only male apostles; that priestly ordination has “always been reserved to men alone” in the Catholic Church; and that excluding women from the priesthood accords with God’s plan.<sup>6</sup>

With all due respect, this position is not theologically sound. As theologian Hans Küng has said: “Rome . . . [bases] the exclusion of women priests on the idea that God is the Father and Jesus is His Son, there were only male disciples, etc. They are defending a patriarchal Church with a patriarchal God. We must fight the patriarchal misunderstanding of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Let me address that misunderstanding. While Jesus did choose twelve men to be his apostles, the four gospels do not say anything about Jesus *ordaining* anyone. It also is not obvious that the twelve were the *only* apostles (John Paul II’s main premise in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*). Scholars have discovered numerous women who served the early Church as bishops, priests, and deacons. In Romans 16: 1-2, St. Paul praises Phoebe, a deacon, for her leadership. In Romans 16: 7, he identifies Junia and her husband as “outstanding apostles.”<sup>8</sup> Dr. Dorothy Irvin has compiled compelling archeological evidence of women’s ordination in the early Church, too.<sup>9</sup>

And consider Mary Magdalene, the only person identified in all four gospels as having stayed with Jesus during his crucifixion. She also was the first to witness his resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Jesus then commissioned her to bring

the good news to the male apostles who, very fearful, were hiding behind locked doors. Mary Magdalene became known as “the apostle to the apostles.”

Finally, a woman was chosen to bring Jesus into the world. I—and many priests I know—see Mary as the first priest. As one student pointed out: “Who is more qualified than Mary to say the words that male priests say during Mass: ‘This is My Body. This is My Blood?’”

For all these reasons, I agree with Sr. Elizabeth Johnson that “. . . scripture shows that both in his early life and risen life Jesus Christ included women in his community, *not as subordinates to men but as sisters to their brothers. . .*” (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> Despite a patriarchal culture, Jesus surrounded himself with women of faith who went on to serve his Church as ably as the men, often in a ministerial capacity.

The Catholic Church teaches that the call to be a priest comes from God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1578: “No one has a right to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed, no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God.”<sup>12</sup>

Many women say that God is calling them to be priests. Who are we, as men, to say that our call from God is authentic, but God’s call to women is not? If, as the *Catechism* says, no one can “claim” the office of Holy Orders because only God can issue the invitation, then how can anyone have the right to *deny* another’s invitation? Who are men to reject God’s call of women to the priesthood?

We do not exclude anyone from the priesthood because of his race or sexual orientation. (Many priests and bishops are gay.) Why do we exclude someone from the priesthood because of her gender? I believe this rejection of women by men has nothing to do with God, but with men who see women as a threat to their power and privilege.

### **Primacy of conscience and prophetic obedience**

John Paul II concludes in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that there should be no debate about the ordination of women. The prohibition against female ordination “is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”<sup>13</sup> For

Catholics—who believe in the primacy of conscience—this is problematical. Conscience is sacred because it is our lifeline to God, independent of hierarchy. Conscience gives us a sense of right and wrong and encourages us to do the right thing. Even Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, before becoming Pope Benedict, stated: “Over the pope . . . there still stands one’s own conscience which must be obeyed before all else—if necessary, even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority.”<sup>14</sup>

The consciences of many devout Catholic women compel them to say that they cannot be silent and deny their call from God to the priesthood. Roman Catholic woman priest Patricia Fresen speaks of the connection between conscience and obedience:

We strive to live in prophetic obedience—to find and walk together the “holy road” along which we trust the Spirit is leading us. . . .

In the older worldview, obedience was understood as doing what you were told by those in authority, but obedience is not doing what you are told by anyone else unless you are a child. Obedience—for adults—comes from the Latin *ob-audire*, attentive listening.<sup>15</sup>

The faithful are called to listen to one’s own “formed conscience” and heart; to “the signs of the times” in society, the Church, and humanity; and to the Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Roman Catholic women priests Elsie Hainz McGrath, Bridget Mary Meehan, and Ida Raming, like Fresen, are considered excommunicated by the Vatican. But they refuse to be cast out, saying:

We are loyal members of the Church who stand in the prophetic tradition of holy obedience to the Spirit’s call to change an unjust law that discriminates against women. We are obeying well-formed and well-informed consciences. We want no “winners and losers.” We want no “fight.” We want balance, a more holistic image of God, renewal. We want unity in a community of equals where all are welcome at the table. . . .<sup>17</sup>

The central questions in the debate about ordaining women in the Catholic Church are these: Who can hear the Word of God? Who, using faith and reason, can “understand the law of God written in the heart of every human being”?<sup>18</sup> The late Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx wrote that the wisdom of the Holy Spirit is not heard or served well by an “authoritarian” Church government. He recommended that a more “democratic” Church would recognize that “the whole of the people of God” can channel the Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Slowly but very surely, we are freeing ourselves from our patriarchal “historical conditioning.” We are becoming a Catholic Church that truly respects women as equals and honors their priestly vocations. The most stubborn clerical culture cannot outlast the Holy Spirit, now working through these prophetic women.

## **B. God Is Calling Women to Be Priests: My Personal Story**

Since I was ordained a Catholic priest in 1972, my religious vocation has had more than 40 years to unfold. In recent years, I have been called to solidarity with Catholic women called to the priesthood. This tells the story of how I awoke to women’s ordination as a justice issue, the response of the Vatican to my advocacy for gender equality, and finally my expulsion from the Maryknoll Order and the priesthood.

As I look back on my life journey, I regret the many times I was silent when others around me were suffering from discrimination and violence. I am grateful to so many people who taught me that silence is the voice of complicity. They awakened and empowered me to break my silence and walk in solidarity with them.

Growing up in a small town in Louisiana, I went to segregated public schools for twelve years. Even our little Catholic church was segregated—with the last five pews reserved for the Black Catholics. I cannot remember one White person in our town—a teacher, coach, priest, parent, or myself—who had the courage to say: “We have a problem here, and it is called racism.” What I do remember are the mantras: “Segregation is our tradition,” and “Blacks are separate but equal.”

After college, I went to the Navy Officer Candidate School and volunteered for shore duty in Vietnam. It was 1965, and our country's leaders said that we had to go to Vietnam to stop the spread of communism. I believed our cause was noble; we were going to be the liberators. I joined the large chorus of voices that said, "We have to fight them in Vietnam or on the shores of California."

Vietnam would become a turning point in my life. Never before had I experienced such violence, suffering, and fear. Death was always near. God and my faith became much more important in Vietnam.

In the midst of war, I met a peacemaker, a healer who would influence my life. He was Father Lucien Olivier, a Catholic missionary who was running an orphanage for over 300 children. Their parents had been killed in the war, most by our guns and bombs. Life at the orphanage was a struggle for survival. My buddies and I helped Father Olivier whenever we could.

Spending time at the orphanage brought meaning and joy to my life; it also brought conflict and sleepless nights. I began to question our presence in Vietnam and started to discuss this with my fellow officers.

I realized the military was not my vocation. My faith grew stronger, and I felt God calling me to be a missionary priest. A Catholic Army chaplain recommended that I join the Maryknoll Missionary Order—headquartered in Ossining, New York. Then and now, they work with the poorest of the poor in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

After returning home, I applied to enter Maryknoll's seminary and (being male) was accepted. I was ordained a Catholic priest and assigned to Maryknoll's mission work in La Paz, Bolivia. A slum on the outskirts of La Paz became my home for the next five years, and the poor, my teachers, introduced me to their "theology of liberation" and a God who empowers and gives hope to the poor.

Liberation theology recognizes and responds to a loving God who wants no one to suffer from oppression, poverty, violence, or discrimination. This God calls everyone to the table as equals. No one is superior to others; the faith community is a discipleship of equals. This model of church is circular and horizontal—quite different from the top-down, patriarchal model emanating from Rome, where men dominate and claim ownership of the Church and the truth.

The poor also introduced me to the importance and meaning of the word "solidarity" in the faith community. In Bolivia, it meant "to accompany" and "to walk with." To be in solidarity meant to make another's struggle for justice, peace, and equality *your struggle*.

It angered me to see my country, the United States, supporting the brutal Bolivian dictator and his military as they oppressed the poor majority of the country. My own country was exploiting Bolivia's cheap labor and vast natural resources, as the *conquistadores* had done centuries ago.

People who are oppressed and exploited, who see their children go to bed hungry and die before their time, do what we would do if we lived under such conditions. They organize, they walk in solidarity with each other, and they speak out for justice. But often those with power and wealth retaliate swiftly and harshly. In Bolivia many were killed or imprisoned for breaking their silence; I was among the many arrested by the military and was forced to leave the country.

As I addressed the injustice of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, I was introduced to an injustice much closer to home, in my own faith community. I met many devout women in the Catholic Church who shared with me their call to the priesthood. What I kept hearing was the same experience I had had in Vietnam, when I felt God was calling me to the priesthood. Lying awake at night, I asked myself a few basic questions: Doesn't God create men and women as equals? Doesn't the call to the priesthood come from God? Who are we, as men, to reject God's call to women? Isn't our all-powerful God capable of empowering a woman to be a priest?

I could not recall ever discussing with fellow priests why women could not be priests. Whenever it came up, there was no discussion. It was simply stated that ordaining only baptized males was "our tradition" in the Catholic Church.

The more I heard stories of women being called by God to the priesthood but rejected by the hierarchy because of their gender, the more I reflected upon my experience of attending segregated schools in Louisiana. We were taught that segregation was "our tradition." Blacks, we said, were separate but equal. The language used to justify racism is very similar to the language used to justify sexism in the Church. In the Catholic Church we

are taught that the all-male priesthood is our tradition and that men and women are equal but have different roles.

Our Church's teaching that excludes women from the priesthood simply cannot stand up to scrutiny. Could this be the reason so many Church leaders and priests refuse to even discuss the issue? Sexism, like racism, is a sin. Discrimination is not the way of our loving Creator who made us all equal. (This, of course, extends as well to our many sisters and brothers who experience the pain of discrimination because of their sexual orientation.) As Reverend Nancy Taylor of Boston has put it, "Prejudice in liturgical clothing is still prejudice."

Excluding women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, against our Church, and against our God who calls both men and women to be priests.

Realizing that silence is the voice of complicity, in May of 1995, I decided to take a number of my concerns directly to Pope John Paul II. Here are some excerpts from that letter.

***I am writing to you out of love and a growing concern for our Church and my Maryknoll community. . . . I must address certain policies in our Church which are causing so much suffering and division. . . .***

***I firmly believe that your policy of excluding women from ordination is wrong. I do not see this policy as rooted in the Scriptures or in the teachings of Jesus, but rather in the sin of sexism and the quest for power.***

***I do not understand how you can say that this is a closed issue and not to be debated or discussed. You, the bishops, and the cardinals in our Church—all men—do not have a monopoly on the truth or the Scriptures. Our loving God calls us to equality and speaks through everyone, through men and women of every race and culture. . . .***

***Jesus was a person of compassion. He went about healing the suffering of others and excluded no one. I pray that you, as our***

***Pope, will have the courage to follow in his footsteps. I appeal to you to please change these policies which are causing so much needless suffering and division in our Church today. . . .***

***In peace and justice,  
Fr. Roy Bourgeois, M.M.***

I never received a response to my letter.

I met more women called by God to serve the Church as priests. Then came an invitation from Janice Sevre-Duszynska to attend her ordination in Lexington, Kentucky. I wrote Janice saying it would be an honor to attend her ordination, knowing that I would be poking another beehive—first the military and now the Church patriarchy. Hundreds attended Janice's ordination in August 2008. Some excerpts from my homily follow.

***When I met Janice years ago, she spoke about her journey of faith and her call to be ordained in the Catholic Church. . . .***

***Sexism is a sin. However, following an idea from Sister Joan Chittister, perhaps the problem is not so much with sexism as it is with the perception of God by those who oppose the ordination of women. We profess that God is all-powerful and the source of life. Yet, when it comes to women being ordained, it seems that our opponents are saying that this same God—who is all-powerful and created the heavens and the earth—somehow cannot empower a woman to be a priest. Suddenly we, as men, believe that God becomes powerless when women approach the altar to celebrate Mass. . . .***

***Conscience is very sacred. . . . Conscience is what compels Janice and other women to say, "No, we cannot deny our call from God to the priesthood." And it is our conscience that compels us to be here today. . . .***

***Janice, all of us present in this church today, and many who cannot be here, support you and walk in solidarity with you in the***

***struggle for peace, justice, and equality. May our loving God bless you in your ministry and journey of faith.***

The ordination of Janice was a celebration of hope and joy. But Church leaders at the Vatican did not share our hope and joy. Seeing the ordination of women as a threat to their power, their response was swift and severe. Less than 90 days after the ordination, I received a letter from the Vatican stating that I had caused grave scandal in the Church by participating in the ordination of a woman. I had 30 days to recant my belief and public statements supporting the ordination of women—or I would be excommunicated *latae sententiae* (automatically).

Because of the seriousness of the letter, I withdrew into solitude for two weeks, and then sent my response to the Vatican. It said, in part:

***November 7, 2008***

***TO THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, THE VATICAN***

***Over the years I have met a number of women in our Church who, like me, feel called by God to the priesthood. You, our Church leaders at the Vatican, tell us that women cannot be ordained. . . .***

***Women in our Church are telling us that God is calling them to the priesthood. Who are we, as men, to say to women, "Our call is valid, but yours is not"? Who are we to tamper with God's call? . . .***

***Hundreds of Catholic churches in the U.S. are closing because of a shortage of priests. Yet there are hundreds of committed and prophetic women telling us that God is calling them to serve our Church as priests.***

***If we are to have a vibrant, healthy Church rooted in the teachings of our Savior, we need the faith, wisdom, experience, compassion, and courage of women in the priesthood.***

***Conscience is very sacred. . . . Conscience is what compelled Franz Jägerstätter, a humble Austrian farmer, husband, and father of***

***four young children, to refuse to join Hitler's army, which led to his execution. Conscience is what compelled Rosa Parks to say she could no longer sit in the back of the bus. Conscience is what compels women in our Church to say they cannot be silent and deny their call from God to the priesthood. . . . And after much prayer, reflection, and discernment, it is my conscience that compels me to do the right thing. I cannot recant my belief and public statements that support the ordination of women in our Church. . . .***

***Having an all-male clergy implies that men are worthy to be Catholic priests but women are not.***

***According to USA TODAY (February 28, 2008), in the United States alone, nearly 5,000 Catholic priests have sexually abused more than 12,000 children. Many bishops, aware of the abuse, remained silent. These priests and bishops were not excommunicated. Yet the women in our Church who are called by God and ordained to serve God's people, as well as the priests and bishops who support them, are excommunicated.***

***Silence is the voice of complicity. Therefore I call upon all Catholics, fellow priests, bishops, Pope Benedict XVI, and all Church leaders at the Vatican to speak out loudly on this grave injustice of excluding women from the priesthood.***

***Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated because of his defense of the oppressed. He said, "Let those who have a voice, speak out for the voiceless."***

***Our loving God has given us a voice. Let us speak clearly and boldly and walk in solidarity, as Jesus would, with the women in our Church who are being called by God to the priesthood.***

***In Peace and Justice,  
Roy Bourgeois, M.M.***

On March 18, 2011, a little more than two years after I had received the Vatican letter insisting that I recant my support for women priests, I received a certified letter from Father Edward Dougherty, the Superior

General of Maryknoll. Evidently under pressure from the Vatican, he wrote that since I had refused to recant and continued in my support for the ordination of women, Maryknoll would dismiss me if I did not recant within 15 days. He also noted my participation in a panel discussion at Barnard College in New York City, following the screening of the documentary film *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican*.<sup>20</sup> His letter stated that I was causing "grave scandal to the people of God, the Church, especially in the United States, and many of the Maryknoll priests and brothers."

Again, I refused to recant.

On July 27, 2011, the Superior General of Maryknoll sent me a Second and Final Canonical Warning, giving me 15 days to recant and retract my support for the ordination of women or he would proceed with the process of my dismissal from Maryknoll and expulsion from the priesthood. Again, he brought up the "grave scandal" I was causing.

I sent a response which is excerpted here:

***August 8, 2011***

***Rev. Edward Dougherty, M.M., Superior General and My Maryknoll Community, P.O. Box 303, Maryknoll, NY 10545***

***My Brothers,***

***I have been a Catholic priest for 39 years and Maryknoll has been my faith community, my family. So it was with great sadness that I received your letter of July 27, 2011 (Second Canonical Warning), stating I must recant my belief and public statements that support the ordination of women, or I will be dismissed from Maryknoll.***

***In my ministry over the years I have met many devout women in our Church who believe God is calling them to be priests. Why wouldn't they be called? God created men and women of equal dignity and, as we all know, the call to be a priest comes from God.***

***My brothers, who are we to reject God's call of women to the priesthood? The Holy Scriptures remind us in Galatians 3:28, "There***

***is neither male nor female. In Christ Jesus you are one.” How is it possible for us to say that our call from God, as men, is authentic, but God’s call of women is not?***

***After much study, reflection, and prayer, I believe that our Church’s teaching that excludes women from the priesthood defies both faith and reason and cannot stand up to scrutiny. This teaching has nothing to do with God, but with men, and is rooted in sexism. Sexism, like racism, is a sin. And no matter how hard we may try to justify discrimination against women, in the end, it is not the way of God, but of men who want to hold on to their power.***

***As people of faith we believe in the primacy of conscience. Our conscience connects us to the Divine. Our conscience gives us a sense of right and wrong and urges us to do what is right, what is just.***

***What you are asking me to do in your letter is not possible without betraying my conscience. In essence, you are telling me to lie and say I do not believe that God calls both men and women to the priesthood. This I cannot do; therefore I will not recant.***

***I firmly believe that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, against our Church, and against our God.***

***As you know, I am not a lone voice crying out in the wilderness for the ordination of women. Polls show that the majority of Catholics support having women priests in the Church. Many fellow priests tell me they believe women should be ordained, but these brothers are afraid to break their silence because of the consequences.***

***As a young man in the military in Vietnam, I felt God was calling me to be a priest. I entered Maryknoll and found the happiness, meaning, and hope I was seeking in life. . . . Why should we deny this call from God—this opportunity—to women?***

***My brothers, in God’s eyes there is neither male nor female. We are one. Just as you and I were called to be priests by our loving***

***God, women are also being called to serve our Church as priests. Let us welcome them and give thanks to God.***

***Your brother in Christ,***

***Roy Bourgeois, M.M.***

In October of 2011, I joined an international delegation of women's ordination leaders going to the Vatican. We met with Church leaders, delivering a petition signed by 15,000 supporters of women's ordination. We showed *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican* at a nearby theater, and we maintained a vigil in St. Peter's Square, holding banners that said: "ORDAIN CATHOLIC WOMEN" and "GOD IS CALLING WOMEN TO BE PRIESTS." Representatives of the Women's Ordination Conference (United States) and Women Can Be Priests (England) and I were removed from St. Peter's Square by Rome police. We were detained for three hours and our banners were confiscated. Again, it was all about solidarity.

Since breaking my silence and calling for the ordination of women, I have received thousands of letters, e-mails, and phone calls from people throughout the world. One issue that has stirred anger in many Catholics is having the Vatican and Maryknoll Superior General refer to the ordination of women as "a grave scandal in the Church." When most Catholics hear the word "scandal," they think of the thousands of priests who sexually abused children and of the many bishops who covered up their crimes against children. Most Catholics do not consider the ordination of women to be a scandal.

On the contrary, surveys and polls by the following have reported that more than 60% of Catholics in the United States support the ordination of women:

***The Associated Press-Ipsos Poll, 2005***

***Gallup Organization Survey, 2005***

***The New York Times/CBS News Poll, 2010***

***Georgetown University Poll, 2011***

***Catholic University of America Poll, 2011***

Anger was especially high in 2010, when the Vatican announced that ordaining a woman is one of the gravest canonical crimes in the Church, on a par with sexually abusing a child. This statement clearly demonstrates how sexist and out-of-touch our hierarchy has become.

According to many letters I received, another development that provoked many Catholics was being told, as adults, that they were not allowed to even discuss the issue of ordaining women. One said, "The last time I was told I could not discuss something, I was five years old." Others asked, "Hasn't the Pope heard of freedom of speech?"

Years ago, my commanding officer in Vietnam told me, "Lieutenant, your job in the military is to implement our country's foreign policy, not to question or discuss it." Today I hear our Church leaders saying something very similar when they tell priests and Catholics: "Your job in the Church is to implement our Church's teachings, not to question or discuss them."

Blind obedience to authority, whether in the military, the Church, or any other institution, is dangerous. And as we saw during the Nuremberg trials, "I was only following orders" is no defense.

Breaking my silence and supporting the ordination of women in our Church is all about solidarity. As the poor in Bolivia taught me years ago, solidarity means "to accompany and to make another's struggle for justice and equality your struggle." And in trying to accompany women in our Church who are called to the priesthood, I have learned a lot.

First, we male priests need to acknowledge that many women, especially those who have been abused or hurt by men, do not feel comfortable confessing to a man. Many women choose neither to discuss deeply personal issues with a man nor to go to a man for spiritual direction. Those women and many more long to hear the voices of women from the pulpit and to have women priests in whom they can confide.

Second, I did not realize how deeply sexism and power permeate the priesthood. We have become a very powerful and privileged clerical culture. As men, we claim that we—and we alone—can interpret the Holy Scriptures and know the will of God. We claim ownership of the Church and of the truth.

And there is great fear. Many priests see women as a threat to our priestly powers and privileges. Some, including longtime friends, have cut off all contact with me, letting me know that I have joined the enemy.

To make the issue more personal, I asked many of my fellow priests what they would say if their sister or niece came to them and said, "I want to share my good news. I feel convinced that God is calling me to the priesthood." About half told me that they would be supportive of their sisters' or nieces' vocations. The other half said they would instruct their sisters or nieces that the Church could not and would not recognize their calls, *and neither would they*. For them, tradition and blind obedience to authority must prevail.

Fear dominates our Church. Many priests tell me that they support the ordination of women but are afraid to say so. When I speak about women's ordination to audiences around the country or show *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican*, most priests will not attend, afraid they might be reported to their bishops or the Vatican. So we meet behind the locked doors of their rectories.

We have all experienced fear in our lives. I experienced it in Vietnam, Bolivia, El Salvador, and prison. But what a scandal and sacrilege to experience fear in one's Church. How un-Christian of Church leaders to act like bullies—using the threat of excommunication or taking away one's pension to enforce a Church teaching. This spiritual violence has no place in a faith community.

Traditions die hard, perhaps especially unjust ones. But I am convinced that injustices can be reversed, even those that are centuries old. There were those, including Catholic Church leaders, who tried to stop the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the right of women to vote. They failed. They failed because these movements were rooted in love, equality, and justice. These movements, including the ordination of women, are of God and are unstoppable.

During the civil rights struggle, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that Whites were enslaved by their racism and fear toward Blacks, and that Whites would be liberated by the Black Americans they oppressed. As a Catholic priest, I see how our all-male priesthood is similarly enslaved by our

sexism and fear toward women in the Church. I also see how we will be liberated and made free by the women we oppress.

The ordination of women in the Catholic Church is inevitable, because it is rooted in love, justice, and equality. In the meantime, the exclusion of women from ordination is a grave injustice against women and against our all-loving God, who calls both men and women to the priesthood.

On November 19, 2012, I learned that I had been "canonically dismissed" from my order, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, and laicized by the Vatican. I released the following:

**November 20, 2012**

**STATEMENT ABOUT MY DISMISSAL FROM MARYKNOLL**

***I have been a Catholic priest in the Maryknoll community for 40 years. As a young man I joined Maryknoll because of its work for justice and equality in the world. To be expelled from Maryknoll and the priesthood for believing that women are also called to be priests is very difficult and painful.***

***The Vatican and Maryknoll can dismiss me, but they cannot dismiss the issue of gender equality in the Catholic Church. The demand for gender equality is rooted in justice and dignity and will not go away.***

***As Catholics, we profess that God created men and women of equal worth and dignity. As priests, we profess that the call to the priesthood comes from God, only God. Who are we, as men, to say that our call from God is authentic, but God's call to women is not? The exclusion of women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, our Church, and our loving God, who calls both men and women to be priests.***

***When there is an injustice, silence is the voice of complicity. My conscience compelled me to break my silence and address the sin of sexism in my Church. My only regret is that it took me so long to confront the issue of male power and domination in the Catholic Church.***

What I am going through is but a glimpse of what women in the Catholic Church and larger society have experienced for centuries. In the midst of my disappointment and sadness, I am filled with hope.

In March of 2013, a *New York Times*/CBS poll reported that 70 per cent of Catholics in the United States believe that Pope Francis should allow women to be priests. I know that one day soon women in my Church will be ordained—just as those segregated schools and churches in Louisiana are now integrated.

I am also filled with joyful anticipation when it comes to equality for lesbian and gay people and same-sex marriage. According to a cover story in *TIME* (April 18, 2013), “Exit polls in November showed that 83 per cent of voters believe that same-sex marriage will be legal nationwide in the next five to 10 years.”

I close with words from my op-ed in *The New York Times* (Mar. 20, 2013): “I have but one simple request for Pope Francis. I respectfully ask that he announce to the 1.2 billion Catholics around the world: ‘For many years we have been praying for God to send us more vocations to the priesthood. Our prayers have been answered. Our loving God, who created us equal, is calling women to be priests in our Church. Let us welcome them and give thanks to God.’”<sup>21</sup>

## **Author’s Bio**

In 2012, Roy Bourgeois was expelled from the Catholic priesthood for refusing to renounce his support for women’s ordination. Section B. of this article is excerpted from his booklet, *My Journey from Silence to Solidarity*. It can be read online or ordered at [www.roybourgeoisjourney.org](http://www.roybourgeoisjourney.org) or [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com); it is also available in Spanish and German. In 1990, Bourgeois founded the School of the Americas Watch, a group working to close a U.S. combat school for Latin American soldiers.

## **Notes**

1. See John Paul II (1995, Item 6).
2. See Johnson (April 2014, Part 1).

3. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (April 2012, 3).
4. See Donahue (1977, 25-34).
5. See Rahner (1981, Chapter 1, 10; see also fuller discussion in Chapter 3, "Women and the Priesthood," 35-50).
6. See John Paul II (1994, Item 1).
7. See Küng (1991).
8. See Meehan (2008).
9. See Irvin (2006).
10. See Johnson (May 2014, Part 2).
11. Ibid.
12. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1578.
13. See John Paul II (1994, Item 4).
14. See Vorgrimler (1969, 134).
15. See Fresen (2008, 31).
16. Ibid., 31-32.
17. See McGrath, Meehan, and Raming (2008, 2).
18. See John Paul II (1995, Item 6).
19. See Schillebeeckx (1990, chapter 4, especially 216-223).
20. See Hart (2011).
21. See Bourgeois (2013).

## References

Bourgeois, R. 2013. "My Prayer: Let Women Be Priests," *NYT* op-ed.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/opinion/my-prayer-let-women-be-priests.html>

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1578.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a6.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a6.htm)

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2012. "Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious."

[http://www.usccb.org/upload/Doctrinal\\_Assessment\\_Leadership\\_Conference\\_Women\\_Religious.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/upload/Doctrinal_Assessment_Leadership_Conference_Women_Religious.pdf)

Donahue, John R. 1977. "A Tale of Two Documents." From *Women Priests*, Arlene Swidler and Leonard Swidler, eds. Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press.

Fresen, P. 2008. "A New Understanding of Priestly Ministry: Looking at a Church in Crisis." In *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of Roman Catholic Womenpriests*, eds. E. H. McGrath, B. M. Meehan, and I. Raming. College Station, Texas: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing, Inc.

Hart, Jules. 2011. *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican*.

<http://www.pinksmokeoverthevatican.com/>

Irvin, D. 2006. *The Rebound - The Calendars, 2003-2007: Archeology of Women's Traditional Ministries in the Church*. St. Paul, MN: Self-published.

John Paul II. 1995. "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women."

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_29061995\\_women\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women_en.html)

John Paul II. 1994. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone).

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html)

Johnson, E. April 22, 2014. "Jesus and Women: 'You Are Set Free,'" Part 1, in Global Sisters Report, a project of the *National Catholic Reporter*,

<http://globalsistersreport.org/column/speaking-god/spirituality/jesus-and-women-you-are-set-free-1186>

Johnson, E. May 1, 2014. "Jesus and Women: 'You Are Set Free,'" Part 2, in Global Sisters Report, a project of *National Catholic Reporter*,

<http://globalsistersreport.org/column/speaking-god/spirituality/part-two-jesus-and-women-you-are-set-free-1966>

Küng, H. July 8, 1991. "The Christian Thing to Do," *Newsweek* interview with B. Ivry.

McGrath, E.H., B. M. Meehan, and I. Raming, eds. 2008. From preface to *Women Find a Way: The Movement and Stories of Roman Catholic Womenpriests*. College Station, Texas: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing, Inc.

Meehan, B. M. 2008. "There Have Always Been Women Priests," the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests, [http://www.arcwp.org/art\\_always.html](http://www.arcwp.org/art_always.html)

Rahner, K. 1981. *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX (Vol. 20)*, trans. Edward Quinn. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company. [First published in 1981. London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd.]

Schillebeeckx, E. 1990. *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Vorgrimler, Herbert, ed. 1969. *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II. Volume V: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. New York: Herder and Herder.