



The Detroit Catholic Worker

Fr. Roy Bourgeois
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Detroit, Michigan
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Welcoming

Rev. Bill Kellerman

We normally don't have this many people for Sunday Service, but you are all invited. St. Peter's does have a charism of hospitality. That is a vocation that we share with our friends and partners, the Detroit Catholic Worker. And this space which is holy space for us is made holy by who walks into the door, and the living use of the space that is made for truth telling, and for planning, and for meals. The table here is the same sacramental table that is spread in the basement at *Manna Meal*, so we welcome you to that.

We begin with a prayer. The Lord be with you. And also with you. O God of justice, God of mercy and love, you who have shown the strength of your arm, brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; you who fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty, we give thanks for your presence with us in community, in church, in beloved community and in history itself in this world. Be present with us this evening. We give thanks for the life and witness of Roy Bourgeois. We recognize your word and your spirit in his ministry. We pray you to be edified; and in all of this, we pray in Jesus. Amen.

Introduction

Fr. Tom Lumpkin

I kind of lobbied for the Catholic Worker being the host, because we have some history with Roy, way back, I think, in the late 70's it was, when we were just getting started. The Maryknolls had a formation house in Detroit, and Roy would be there sometimes, and would hang around with us at the soup kitchen and house; and so this is kind of a home away from home for him in a way. So we are very happy to be able to host him. We've asked him - I'm not sure this is what he is going to do - but we asked him to share his own personal journey with us tonight. I think what you'll find is a very particular way of living out a general kind of call. When you read the Scriptures, when you read the lives of the saints, when someone gets called by God for one thing, it's always an ongoing thing. You don't get the call once and for all, and then you're on maintenance for the rest of your life. It unfolds as you go through your life. That's true for all of us, but, I think, in a very particular way, we will see that with Roy. And the other thing about a really authentic call from God: it always causes some kind of dying process. Always! And you'll see that from dying and rising, from solidarity in different ways of living out. It always involves some kind of dying and some kind of rising. So we are very happy to welcome Roy. He is going to share some of his story with you, and then, after he does that, we're going to take a short break; and then we will have some questions and answers (applause). Roy.

My Journey

Fr. Roy Bourgeois

Thank you so much. Tom is right! It has been quite a while now since I was here. I have such good memories at the Worker House in the late 70's, especially in the 80's, but I am just humbled really to be back. And thank you, Julie, for that wonderful music, and the warm hospitality of Bill Kellerman and the community here at St. Peter's. But I can only share with you some of my journey; we all have this journey we're on. We were touched in unique ways by experiences and people who challenge us. But I must confess, growing up in this humble little town in Louisiana, most families, very traditional Catholics, we were not challenging each other. We did not question our country's foreign policy; and certainly did not question our Church's teachings.

It was easy for me really to enter the military. In a way it was my ticket out of Louisiana. I became a naval officer; and it was a time to explore the world, an adventurous time. I thought of making it a career; and when our leader said we had to go to Vietnam to stop the spread of communism, our cause was goin' to be noble. That same language we used to justify the war and invasion in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan. So many of us went off to that war in Vietnam. I reflect back on that, and sometimes I think our greatest enemy in life is ignorance. But that experience in Vietnam, for me and for many of us, and also for many in Afghanistan and Iraq, it became a turning point. We're not made for war. Our loving creator gave us this heart: conscience. We cannot go about the business of violence and killing and destruction ongoing in our lives before. We read so much today about PTSD, suicides. I lived outside this big base, Ft. Benning. There is so much violence we read about coming out of that, and really, it was the madness of Vietnam, the violence, death being very close, that my faith in my God became close. And in the midst of that, I felt this kind of deep inner voice, this call to the priesthood - which was a little strange, because whenever I saw a priest, I turned around and headed the other way (laughter). So I talked to this army chaplain about this, what to do with this call; and he recommended the Maryknoll order; and I said Mary who? I had never heard of them. And he said they are working with the poorest of the poor in Africa, Asia, Latin America; and it sounded great. It was like sort of rediscovering this hope that we lost there in Vietnam. And being male, I was able to enter the priesthood. And really, over the years, found that joy, that hope, that meaning in life that I and we are all seeking.

Injustice toward the poor in Latin America

And then, in 1972, ordained and assigned to our mission work in Bolivia, where this slum on the outskirts of La Paz became my home for the next five years. And it was here where the poor became my teachers. They really began to teach this *gringo* about their struggle, about my country's foreign policy. There we were in Bolivia, supporting this brutal dictator, General Hugo Banzer Suarez, so brutal toward the poor. But it was there in Bolivia, where the poor also introduced to me their theology, a theology of liberation that gave such hope to the poor and the oppressed, a theology quite different from what most of us were weaned on, getting away from that very patriarchal Church. Liberation Theology gives us a Church that is very circular, that empowers people, encourages them to speak rather than to obey, a theology that really calls everyone to that table as equals, a Catholic Worker model where all at that table are of equal worth and dignity, where no one can dare say, "I am superior" to the other. And also out of that Liberation Theology comes that all important word *solidaridad*: solidarity, which simply means: to walk with, to accompany others in their struggle, to make the struggle of others, especially the struggle for justice and equality and peace. Make that your struggle!

And in my fifth year there, the repression intensified; so many were killed; the jails filled up. I was among the many arrested and forced out of the country. And when I came back to the U.S., many of us turned our attention to El Salvador. Archbishop Oscar Romero had just been gunned down in his church while saying Mass because of his great love for the poor and his defense of the poor. Four Church women four months later from our country were raped and killed by the Salvadorian military; two of them, Maryknoll Sisters, Maura Clarke and Ita Ford, friends of so many, along with the Ursuline members, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan. And when that happened to the four Church women, it shook us. El Salvador became much closer to home, and many of us went there. And what we found once again was our country deeply involved giving guns and training to those doing the killing.

I and others came back from El Salvador, and we could not shut up. We had to speak out. And when 500 Salvadorians arrived at Fr. Benning, Georgia to start training and combat, a small group of us went there to say "Not in our name." We protested. We went onto Fr. Benning dressed as high ranking army officers that night; and near the barracks where the Salvadorians were housed, we blasted the last sermon of Bishop Romero. We had this big tape player. We saw that as a very sacred moment. The army didn't quite see it that way (laughter). We were arrested, brought to trial, and sent to prison for a year and a half. And I must say, we went to prison and found meaning there. But we knew it was all about solidarity. When we got out of prison, we couldn't stop the bloodshed. Our military aid going to El Salvador, all coming from our tax money, reached a million dollars a day; and now they went after the Jesuits at their university there in San Salvador, the Unca. After midnight, November 16, 1989, they dragged these six Jesuits out of their rooms, with them a young mother, their co-worker, Elba, and her teenage daughter, Selena; and they were massacred, shot at close range. This made the front pages of newspapers all over

the world. It angered many members of our congress, who knew some of the Jesuits, or were educated at many of their high schools or colleges here at home. They sent a Congressional task force to investigate. They came back reporting that those who did the killing were trained at the U. S. Army School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

And that's when I and a small group of ten of us gathered at the main gate of Fr. Benning for a very serious water only fast, our very first action - a fast that went thirty-five days. Among our little group was a girl, Kathy Kelly, many of you know Kathy; a Jesuit from Boston, Charlie Lippky; a Vietnam vet, a recipient of the Medal of Honor; two Salvadorian college students, who had to flee their country with death threats and others. The fast was hard, of course, but we knew what this was about. It was about solidarity. And after the fast we had to do our homework and investigate this school; and what we found was very serious, very disturbing. Over 50,000 soldiers from eighteen countries had been trained here in commando tactics, counter-insurgency. We learned that the insurgents were, who they have always been, the poor, the labor leaders, especially in Columbia, where most of the soldiers were coming from; university students, human rights activists, spiritual leaders like Romero and the Church women and others. They were the targets of those trained here; and again, all paid for with our tax money, all done in our name. When the United Nations truth commission report announced that those who killed Bishop Romero, the Church women, the Jesuits, and the list went on and on, were graduates of the School of the Americas, our movement just blossomed.

We started the *SOA Watch* with a national office in Washington D.C. And we put the word out, "Let us gather at the main gate every November, that weekend before Thanksgiving, to keep alive the memories of our sisters and brothers, of these countries, whose lives had been taken, whose voices had been silenced. Let us call for the closing of this school of the assassins." And our movement went from 10 to a 100, to a 1,000, to 5,000, to 10,000, to 15,000. And when we gathered, it was this wonderful celebration of hope. I know some of you here - I recognize you - you have been down there many times; but if I could just see a show of hands of those who have been down to Georgia (applause). Many are students. And *Grandmothers for Peace* are with us and *Vietnam Vets for Peace*. Parents come with their little ones, knowing that what better place and way to teach our children about peace making and non-violence. The women religious, the nuns, joined our movement in the very early days. And when we gather, we have a lot of speakers, musicians. The *Puppetistas* give such joy and life to the old and to the young. We take over the Convention Center with all kinds of workshops and our movement is broad. It is not just about that school, which is but a symbol of US foreign policy in Latin America, and how these soldiers simply allow our country to exploit the cheap labor and those vast natural resources in these countries; and without the men and these guns this would not be possible.

But our movement has expanded and made connections to other important issues like the drones, like racism, homophobia, sexism, militarism, and all those issues that are so intertwined and connected. Sunday is very solemn at the site. We have the beautiful session where thousands carry the small crosses bearing the names of the victims and their ages; and as we process to the main gate, the names are called out individually. Many weep. We're touching on the sacred. And when we get to the fence, we turn it into this memorial wall. We pray. It takes about three hours to complete the procession; and from the very beginning, we have been doing this for twenty-two years. And every year there are those who feel compelled, after much discernment, to cross the line, to go over that fence, or around it, or cut a hole through it, to take the message into Ft. Benning; and they are arrested, charged with criminal trespass; and I am happy to report that a little over 300 of our people have gone off to prison. One of them is there now. You can get his address on the *SOA Watch* website. Do we have any of our prisoners of conscience here with us this evening? Yes, those who have gone to prison in general. Somebody, when we were having that great meal prepared by Tom Lumpkin and others, someone said, "Did you hear that Bill Kellerman is in jail?" I said, "No! I just saw him ten minutes ago. Was he arrested? Did they just take him away?" (Laughter) But when they - as we have all experienced - when they send us to jail and arrest us, it exposes the injustice. It calls more attention to the issue. And when they send us off to the jails and prisons, we've learned something very important, that the great peacemakers like Mahatma Gandhi and Caesar Chavez, Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Dorothy Day and others taught us: *the truth cannot be silenced*. And like they taught us we speak from confinement.

I'm happy to report that there is a lot of hope in our movement. A few years ago we started a strategy of going to these countries sending their troops here, to meet with their Presidents and Defense Ministers. I'm happy to report that six countries have pulled out. (Applause) Those countries being: Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, and just this past year, after meeting with the Presidents of Ecuador and Nicaragua, they too made a decision to pull out (Applause). I know that just three weeks ago in El Salvador, with our delegation, Maran Perrone and others were with us, we had a big group of twenty five; and it was so important to go to El Salvador, a land of the martyrs. And we came back more determined than ever. We came back from El Salvador just a couple of weeks ago, more determined than ever to close down the school. And we're gonna to do it! We are going to keep our hands on the plow, our eyes on the prize, knowing that that day will come; and hopefully it will be soon. But for more information, really, on this issue - really we can talk a lot more on this issue - but I want to move on; but just go to our website, SOAW.org, and you will also see also the address of our prisoner of conscience, Jose Isabel Morales Nashua; and he's just arrived at the federal prison in Tallahassee, Florida. He'd love to hear from you.

Injustice toward the women in the Catholic Church

But it was in this movement of trying to call attention to this injustice of our country's' foreign policy in the School of the Americas that I discovered this injustice much closer to home - in my Church. I began to meet, in many talks and churches, so many peace groups, colleges, devout Catholic women who shared with me their call to the priesthood. And what I heard kept me awake at night - because what I heard was the same experience I had years ago as a young guy - that mysterious, but very sacred calling. And I began to ask a couple of basic questions that we never asked during those seminary days: like, "Why wouldn't women be called?" Don't we as Catholics and most people of faith say that we are all created of equal worth and dignity? Galatians 3:28 reminds us very clearly: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." But the very important question that surfaced was this: that I began to ask myself and my fellow priests, "We all say," the Pope and all the priests would say this, "the call to be a priest is a gift and comes from God, none other than God." And so that all important question: "Who are we, as men, to say that our call from God is authentic; but your call as women is not?" (Applause) And the other question, to paraphrase Sr. Joan Chittister, she put it this way, "Isn't our all-powerful God, who created the cosmos, the beauty of this day, the sun the stars, isn't this all-powerful God capable of empowering a woman to be a priest?" (laughter) Let's face it: the problem is not with God; (laughter and loud applause) the problem is with this all male, clerical culture that has been around and kept gaining more and more power over the centuries, who view women as lesser than men, who see women as a threat to their/our power. And what I began to see at the core of our Church's teaching, excluding women from the priesthood, was that sin of sexism.

And helping me to understand that issue of sexism really was to go back and to reflect on growing up in Louisiana, my childhood, attending twelve years of segregated public schools, and worshipping in a Catholic church, where the last five pews were reserved for the black members. And I cannot remember one white person, not a teacher, not our macho football coaches, or a parent, or the priest, or us students, myself included, whoever said: "We have a problem here; it's called racism." What I do remember very well are the mantras: "It is our tradition; yes, we are separate, but we are equal."

And what I'm hearing from our Vatican leaders, our bishops, sounds so similar. They say, "We cannot ordain women, because it is our tradition," knowing that this man, Jesus, never ordained anyone (Applause). Who also say, "Yes, men and women are equal, but we have different roles." Really! (Laughter) Sexism, like racism, like homophobia, and all those other forms of discrimination, prejudice, this is a sin! It's wrong! It's immoral! And no matter how hard we may try to justify our discrimination against others, in the end, it is never the way of God, this all loving God, who created us of equal worth and dignity. And we have all learned, I think, that when there is an injustice, especially that injustice of discrimination that causes such suffering, that we only get glimpses of, silence is the voice of complicity.

And I realized I had to break my silence. And when I did, I started poking that beehive of patriarchy. Like most of us, I started with little baby steps; but then, I reached a point where every time I got an invitation to speak about the School of the Americas and that injustice, they got the package deal (laughter). They also heard about this injustice in my Church. And then, came the invitation to go to Rome for a big conference on the School of the Americas, attended by hundreds of priests and women religious. And I

felt happy, because it was well received. Many came from throughout Europe to learn about this U. S. foreign policy. And then on the last day, before coming back to the US, I was invited on Vatican Radio to speak about the issue of the School of the Americas, a fifteen minute live interview going on in two different languages. And everything went really well for thirteen minutes; (Laughter) and I just knew this moment would never present itself again. (Laughter) I know some of you may have been to Rome, St. Peter's Square. There's the Pope's residence, right across, there is Vatican Radio, right there. What better place to say this; and I just put it out there. I said, "We have been talking about this injustice of US foreign policy. As a Catholic priest, I just want to say that there will never be justice in the Catholic Church until women can be ordained." (Loud Applause) I wanted to talk a little bit about that "s" word: sexism, and racism; and it was not to be. I had another minute to go, and the Vatican radio manager came in and did this: (hand across the neck) cut me off the air; and then that Gregorian chant started playing (laughter). I slept very well that night. I mean it. And when I got back to Georgia, I got a call from the Maryknoll headquarters. Of course, someone had reported me; and they didn't make a big deal out of it, they just said, "Kind of cool it a little bit." But I went about my work; and wherever I spoke, the message was well received. I realized that I was not this lone voice crying in the wilderness. Recent polls: Gallup, AP, just last month a New York Times and CBS came out with this poll showing that 70% of Catholics in the United States support the ordination of women (Applause) and a greater percentage support a married clergy (Applause).

And then came the invitation to attend the ordination of women. One of the many women called, Janice Sevre-Duszynska, a longtime friend in the SOA Watch movement, and one of our many prisoners of conscience, a school teacher from Kentucky, who invited me to attend her ordination saying, "It would be an honor." And hundreds gathered for her ordination. It was this wonderful celebration of hope, such joy, thanking God and Janice for responding to that call, saying she wanted to serve our Church for the rest of her life, and the poor of the Church and society - very connected also to the Catholic Worker movement.

Let me just say that our joy was not shared by the Vatican! (Laughter) Just weeks later, about a month later, I got this very important letter, a serious letter, from the Vatican. First of all they began by saying I was causing grave scandal in the Church; and I had thirty days to recant my public support for the ordination of women, or I would be excommunicated - thirty days. I went on retreat for about a week. I needed some solitude, quiet time; I had to get it right. And I wrote back simply stating, focusing in on that issue of the sacredness of conscience, how we've all been taught and know that our conscience is very sacred. It's our lifeline to the Divine. Our conscience always urges us to do what is right, what is just. And when we follow our conscience, we're at peace; there's that deep inner joy. We sleep well at night. And when we violate or go against our conscience, we are tormented; we're restless; we're off course. And I simply said, "What you are asking me to do is not possible. You're demanding that I lie and say to you, 'I do not believe that God created us equal and calls both to the priesthood. This I will not do.'" And I felt it was important to also address the issue of scandal (laughter). And I simply stated that when Catholics hear the word scandal, they do not think about the ordination of women (much laughter and applause). And I simply used statistics out of USA Today and the New York Times and other newspapers, I stated that in the U.S. alone over 4,000 Catholic priests sexually abused over 10,000 children, while the many bishops and cardinals were silent, aware of their crimes, and covering them up. I never got a response back from my letter. (Laughter)

I went about my ministry, speaking more clearly and boldly about that issue of gender equality. And then on November 19th, just a few months ago, the day after I would be gathering at the vigil at the main gate of Ft. Benning, saying goodbye to a lot of friends who come in from long distances, I got this call from the Maryknoll headquarters in New York, saying they had received an official letter from the Vatican with a statement from Pope Benedict, that I had been officially expelled from the priesthood and my Maryknoll community. And I must say, it came as a shock - many of us who have been through experiences like that - we are numb! You kind of go down for the count of nine. And I just had to leave; I had to be alone. Quiet. Gather my thoughts. It was a sleepless night, but the next day I realized that I had to make a response. And I simply sent to Maryknoll and to the Vatican a brief response stating, "Yes, it is indeed very painful and hurtful to be expelled from the priesthood, and 40 years, and my Maryknoll community for 46." But I did say, "You can dismiss me, but you cannot dismiss the issue of gender equality (Applause). That issue will not go away." *Impossible!*

And I remember also stating that we were told - that was the most offensive thing - to be told early on that we couldn't even discuss this issue, that Pope John Paul, in his papal document in 1994, stated very clearly: we can't talk about this issue; and I found that most offensive, as all adults would. And the last time most of us were told we couldn't talk about something, we were like five or six years old (laughter). Today, we are adults; and to be told that we can't talk about something - and to have the women religious be told just recently, and once again, that they have to fall in and be submissive to these men at the Vatican - that is so offensive!

But, you know, what I was going through made me realize, I'm getting only a glimpse of what women in the Church and society have experienced for centuries: that rejection, that pain, that suffering, that hurt that I was experiencing was but a glimpse of what so many have experienced for centuries. And, I must say, today in the midst of the sadness, I'm bouncing back as many of us do after going down. I'm filled with a lot of hope; because, like you, I know that this movement is unstoppable, like the gay marriage, the marriage equality, unstoppable. And we can learn from these other movements and get hope. There were many who tried to stop the abolition of slavery, including many in the Church. They failed! There are men in society, and in the Catholic Church, and other faith communities, who tried to stop the right of women to vote. They too failed! Many tried to stop the civil rights movement. They couldn't! And the reason they couldn't was because those movements, like the same sex marriage issue and the ordination of women, this is inevitable, because these movements are rooted in justice, in dignity and equality (Much Applause).

Closing

And so in closing, I'm often asked, "What do we do?" In the midst of these struggles and all of these issues involving discrimination, militarism, violence, what do we do? Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, before he was assassinated by graduates of that School of the Americas down there in Georgia, said it this way: "We all have a voice. We all can do something in that struggle. We all have something to contribute. And we can do it well." He gave his life for that struggle. I think it's very important for us to identify ourselves, and that has been what I find kind of sad and I could have well done. So many of my fellow priests won't identify themselves on these issues. They might upset people. They might upset the bishop or the pope. Their pension might be jeopardized. But others who are just family members, who are working hard, and families, students young and old, that's how we are sort of afraid to identify ourselves.

I've been doing a lot of reflection on that word fear. It can be our biggest enemy. We've all experienced fear. I know I have in Vietnam, Bolivia, El Salvador, in prison; but if we allow fear to paralyze us, we're not human. And what's so important today is really in a loving way, a kind way, to let others know how we feel deep down about these issues, of peace, and justice, and equality; to identify ourselves, and not end our lives like many would perhaps, "Well, how would our friend feel about this important issue? Well, I don't know; he or she never talked about it. We never knew how they stood." Say it!

But let me just say I'm happy, because I am filled with hope, because I know that today, as I look back, those segregated schools in Louisiana and our segregated churches are now integrated; and real soon we'll have women priests in the Catholic Church. Thank you. (Applause)

Transcribed by

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