

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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PROPHETS WITH A SMILE

I recently spent a day with three prophets – a Sister, a Father, and a movie. The Sister is Sr. Jeannine Gramick; the Father is Fr. Roy Bourgeois, and the movie is *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican*. The event was sponsored by the Faithful of Southern Illinois, a lay group dedicated to education and advocacy in the spirit of Vatican II.

First, the movie: *PSOV* is a powerful, compelling, straightforward, hour long documentary about women priests in the Catholic Church. Ordinations and excommunications follow the lives of courageous Catholic women who acknowledge and answer the call to priesthood. The movie is not yet in wide distribution because negotiations with HBO are still underway. Once that is resolved, it will either be on HBO or more widely distributed, or both. See it.

Sr. Jeannine Gramick is, and has been for decades, a clear, brave voice for the Catholic gay and lesbian community. Her story of maintaining that voice through Vatican investigations and profound pressure on her and her religious communities earns her the distinguished title of public prophet.

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, the Maryknoll priest who was the subject of a Church Chat recently, and who the Vaticanistas are now trying to excommunicate because of his public stance promoting the ordination of women, demonstrated his bold commitment to the primacy of his conscience in refusing to recant.

Here's one permanent take-away for me: these are not angry people. I see clear, courageous, consistent, almost mild-mannered resolve, but not anger. The predictable, hierarchical response to these prophetic voices does not silence them, nor does it seem to infuriate them. I had the pleasure of spending some social time with them, and three of the women priests, after the presentation, and the sense of outrage was once again noticeably absent. They all appeared to be strong and composed. I had just seen the movie *Invictus* on TV, and these folks reminded me of Nelson Mandela.

There are many issues in the Church and in the world that scream for gospel scrutiny. But it's not the people who scream their response who get the best results. It is the intelligent, informed, smiling prophets who persist and persuade.

If we are in the protest and prophetic business, how do we manage our anger? There is, of course, basis for anger. But unmanaged, uncontrolled anger runs amuck and ultimately destroys us, while the external cause of our anger goes merrily on its way.

Though I don't know them well enough to say, here's my guess on how Roy, Jeannine, the women priests (and Nelson Mandela) dealt with their anger:

- Separated their personal experience and hurt from the policy that caused the injustice and the people who implemented that policy;
- Through prayer, personal reflection and/or the help of some trusted counselors or friends, named, owned and resolved their personal anger;
- Focused their attention on other people who are affected by the same policy and attempt to speak for them because they do not have the opportunity, talent, or courage to speak for themselves;
- Accept the inevitable push-back and criticism from the policy makers and implementers with the perspective of the William Ernest Henley poem, *Invictus*: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”

The many world issues and Church issues that cause or contribute to injustice must be challenged. Some issues are minor, some are major. How they are ranked in order of importance is usually the prerogative of the person who does the ranking. My suggestion is to pick the issue that affects you the most, that you are most passionate about and stick with it. Acknowledge that it is not the only issue, but make it your issue.

In this process, take a lesson from these three prophets: deal with your personal anger, perhaps something like I think they did. Then, your credentials as a prophet will improve immensely.

And, God knows (literally), we need many more prophets, in and out of the Church.