Opinion

News



More than a hundred students and faculty from Northeast Ohio Catholic high schools attended the March for Our Lives in Cleveland Public Square on March 24. (Christine Schenk)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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Three Catholic students helped organize Cleveland's nonviolent march and rally against gun violence March 24.

Grace Kelley and Jane Roche, both 17-year-old students from St. Joseph Academy, and Sam Hoag, an 18-year-old student from St. Ignatius High School, joined public school counterparts in planning the event, which attracted an estimated 20,000 impassioned teenagers and adults.

More than a hundred students and faculty from Northeast Ohio Catholic high schools attended the march in Cleveland Public Square, including students from St. Joseph Academy, St. Ignatius, Cleveland Central Catholic, Beaumont, Magnificat, Villa Angela-St. Joseph, Gilmour Academy and Walsh Jesuit.

At 8:15 a.m., I boarded a bus with a contingent of young women from St. Joseph Academy, along with principal Jeff Sutliff and school librarian Rebecca Synk.

On the way downtown, I asked the students why they were marching that day. Almost to a person, they replied that they wanted to protest "senseless acts of violence against children" and that they "didn't want to be afraid to come to school."

St. Ignatius High School, which is within walking distance of Public Square, served as a staging area. Catholic marchers gathered there to make signs and pray together before walking to the rally site. The prayer service featured powerful reflections prepared by St. Ignatius faculty and students.

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"It's reassuring that you're here today, because every single one of you is a leader. Every single one of you has a light and a fire inside of you that nobody has the right to put out," said Dillion Gallagher, a junior. "Keep in mind when we're marching

today that we are leaders and we are all capable of amazing change. ... We're marching to end violence. We are marching for the right to feel safe in our schools, and we're marching for our lives."

Samantha Burke from St. Joseph Academy raised "prayers and hope for the Parkland [Florida] families and friends who have experienced loss or injury, and that they would feel [God's] support and presence."

A St. Ignatius faculty member wept as he asked the students for forgiveness for his generation. Lamenting that since Sandy Hook in 2012, more children have been killed by gun violence than soldiers killed in combat since September 11, 2001, Alan Wilhelms said, "My hope is that my grandchild will forgive my generation for permitting gun violence to permeate our society and congratulate your generation for finally, finally resolving this murderous problem by your action, your fortitude and your vote."

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A prayer service is held at St. Ignatius High School before Cleveland's March for Our Lives March 24. (Christine Schenk)

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Cleveland high schoolers demonstrate in the March for Our Lives March 24. (Christine Schenk)

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  Cleveland Congregation of St. Joseph sisters march to end gun violence March 24. (Jean Alvarez)

Senior student Joseph Ezersky sadly told about classmates assigned to create a photo essay about their response to gun violence: "For every poster I saw affirming restrictive gun regulations, I saw one comparing American gun control with gun control in Nazi Germany or in Stalin's Soviet Union."

While every citizen has the right to bear arms, Erzesky said, each also has the right to live lives free of the fear of gun violence, so that "when these two rights conflict, our morality and our faith tells us that we must defend the dignity of life over all other things."

Ezersky continued, "We cannot forget that Dr. King was jailed for his nonviolence, Gandhi was jailed for his nonviolence, and as Holy Week approaches, we cannot forget the resistance and persecution faced by Christ while preaching the good news."

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At the rally itself, marchers heard from political figures as well as movement activists. Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson congratulated the students, urging them to "stay strong, focused and committed."

Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish compared the event to demonstrations against the Vietnam War, saying, "I want the politicians in Washington to hear this. These aren't paid actors; they're our kids."

Grace Yo of public Mayfield High School evoked rueful laughter and applause when she observed, "My school dress code is stricter than gun laws."



The principal of St. Joseph Academy, Jeff Sutliff, and his daughter prepare to join the March for Our Lives in Cleveland March 24. (Christine Schenk)

After the rally, Claire Forrestal, who is a student leader from St. Joseph Academy, said she found it "really powerful to see this be a student-led movement. So, we're here not only to support the people that are leading this movement from Parkland, but also just for each other because it's important that we all have safe schools, safe environments."

Sutliff, who brought his 9-year-old daughter to her first march, was "very proud of our students for standing up for life and working to make positive change in the world — 'that all may be one.' "

St. Joseph Academy is a sponsored ministry of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph and the phrase "That all may be one" (John 17:21) is central to the congregation's charism of unity and reconciliation.

Synk also expressed pride in the students and all the young people at the march. "They just are so inspiring and gives me hope for the future."

At the end of the day, Ezersky's prayer reflection perhaps best expresses the sentiments of marching students:

> I don't know what lies ahead for this movement or what lies ahead for our nation, but I do know that amidst this stormy present, I'm ready to embark upon the journey. I'm ready to point myself towards the horizon of the future and sail into unknown waters with only my faith in God and my knowledge of his truth as my compass.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

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