News



Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark, New Jersey (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Fr. Desmond Rossi, who has said he was sexually assaulted by two fellow seminarians in the Archdiocese of Newark 30 years ago, is organizing "A National Day for Reform" demonstration in front of Newark's Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart on Aug. 29.

The protest, he told NCR, will be "a loyal demonstration" among priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and laity interested in addressing the sex abuse crisis.

They will call for treating victims in a just and merciful manner and to "make the systemic changes necessary to lead the church back to sanctity and wholeness." The demonstration, which begins at 1 p.m., will include prayers for the health of the church.

A goal, he said, "is to keep the conversation going. My fear is that we will become complacent."

Lay Catholics, he said, need to know "that their priests hear them. We will let them know we are listening. We hear them. The question is whether the leaders are listening."

Rossi's charge of sexual assault is now being reconsidered by the Newark Archdiocese, after an archdiocesan review board ruled in 2003 that his charges, while credible, could not be substantiated. One of the men he has accused is an active archdiocesan priest; the other, a former pastor, has died.

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Rossi left the Newark Archdiocese and was ordained for the Albany Diocese, where he serves as associate pastor at St. Mary's Church in Glens Falls, New York. In his public statements, Rossi has said that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, at one time the archbishop of Newark, sexually harassed seminarians and set a degraded moral tone imitated by the men Rossi says attacked him.

Rossi told NCR that he has heard from 17 people who say they were abused as children and that his testimony has encouraged them to talk about their experiences. They include former seminarians and those who say they were abused by teachers and camp counsellors as well as by priests.

He said that he chose the Newark cathedral for the site of the demonstration because the archdiocese is where "much of Cardinal McCarrick's abuse took place. It has become the center of the storm."

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