News

"Walk for Peace" volunteers, parishioners and community members gather before Mass at St.

"Walk for Peace" volunteers, parishioners and community members gather before Mass at St. Agnes Church in San Francisco Feb. 5, 2022. (CNS photo/Melissa Vlach, Archdiocese of San Francisco Office of Human Life & Dignity)

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SAN FRANCISCO — A group of Catholics and community members proclaimed "What do we want? Peace and justice!" and carried white crosses as they walked two miles from midtown San Francisco to St. Agnes Church in the city's Haight-Ashbury district to honor those who died by violence last year.

The "Walk for Peace," organized by the Archdiocese of San Francisco's Restorative Justice Ministry, brought together Bay Area volunteers, parishioners, and community members to publicly call for an end to the violence that claimed 56 lives by homicide in San Francisco, 16 in San Mateo County and two in Marin County.

The Feb. 5 walk, which began at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, ended with a Mass celebrated at St. Agnes as a memorial for all those who died, some still unknown.

Julio Escobar, Restorative Justice coordinator, explained the day was an important way of remembering those who don't have others to remember them.

"Some people died and didn't even have a family," he said in the event's opening remarks.

Marianella Sobalvarro, a parishioner at St. Bruno Church in San Bruno, California, echoed this in explaining her reasons for attending.

"Even though I didn't know anybody, I wanted to come and support all of those souls because they might not have anyone to pray for them," she said.

Throughout the walk, the group chanted, "What do we want? Peace and justice! When do we want it? Now!"

Kathy Fourre of the Church of the Epiphany in San Francisco commented that making a public statement brings the issue to the attention of those who haven't been personally affected by violence.

"If you haven't lost somebody or if it's not happening right in front of you, it's easy to forget," she said.

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For many, however, the issue is all too personal. A number of attendees have lost loved ones to violence, and several shared their thoughts after the group arrived at St. Agnes.

Tinisch Hollins, executive director of Californians for Safety and Justice, spoke about losing several family members to violence and how that spurs her on in her work.

"Long before I became the executive director of this organization, doing policy work to remove barriers for victims and survivors, it was clear that the only way for us to keep our communities safe was to help people when they'd been hurt and to help the people who are hurting," Hollins said. "That's how we get to safety."

Father Jayson Landeza, pastor of St. Benedict Church in Oakland, California, came with some of his parishioners. He said that they are active in standing for peace in their local neighborhood, which sees high levels of violence.

"So we commit ourselves in what we do and the work we do today to make sure that we remember and that we do ... our own part to make sure that violence, that scourge, decreases in our own midst," Father Landeza said.

Jesuit Father George Williams celebrated the Mass and spoke of mourning the lives lost to violence and grieving for the perpetrators who destroy part of themselves by committing acts of violence, while remembering the interconnectedness of all humans through God.

"Our language, our culture, the very symbols of our religions all come from our interconnection with one another, and when a homicide occurs, that connection is torn, it's broken," said Father Williams, pastor of St. Agnes who previously was chaplain for many years at San Quentin State Prison.

The Restorative Justice Ministry also holds street prayer services for individual lives lost to violence throughout the year.