Opinion

NCR Voices



The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence show their support during the gay pride parade in West Hollywood, California, June 12, 2016. (AP/Richard Vogel,File)



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Amid the controversy over the Los Angeles Dodgers honoring the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a charity group that parodies religious women by dressing in drag and habits, real Catholic sisters have been relatively silent.

Some on social media have joined the Catholic League's Bill Donohue and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio in condemning the ball club and the group for what they see as a lack of respect for the habit and for the Christian faith. NCR's Global Sisters Report Editor Gail DeGeorge also came to the defense of religious women, although she acknowledged that she did not presume to speak for Catholic sisters.

So I wondered what actual Catholic sisters thought — especially those who have long worked in ministry with LGBTQ folks.

I got one answer last week, when New Ways Ministry shared a letter that Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick had written to the Dodgers, supporting their decision to give the Community Hero Award to the group.

"While I am uncomfortable with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence using the nuns' old garb to draw attention to bigotry, whether Catholic or not, there is a hierarchy of values in this situation," Gramick wrote. "The choice of clothing, even if offensive to some, can never trump the works of mercy."

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Gramick has a decadeslong history of ministry among LGBTQ Catholics, and paid a price for that ministry after she and fellow New Ways co-founder Salvatorian Fr. Robert Nugent were admonished by the Vatican in 1999. More recently, however, correspondence from Pope Francis has referred to Gramick as "a valiant woman."

According to their website, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are devoted to "community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges, and to promoting human rights, respect for diversity and spiritual enlightenment." They have reportedly raised $1.5 million for charity since their inception in 1979.

"We use humor and irreverent wit to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit," says a note at the top of their website. Drag — the dressing as women by men — is, by definition, meant to be exaggerated and performative.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence's use of oversized headgear, heavy makeup and other aspects of theatrical drag is not offensive to Providence Sr. Barbara Battista, since she sees it as entertainment, not serious commentary.

Battista praises the service done by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, comparing it to that of actual Catholic sisters. "My take on all this is 'good for them,' " Battista told me. "To my mind, it's just bringing the Gospel to the marketplace. I have no trouble with that."

If anything, Battista sees the performance "as a tribute to sisters and what we do. We live a life of service, and that's what they do."

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>
> —Providence Sr. Barbara Battista
>
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In her role as justice promoter for the Sisters of Providence in St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, Battista has been instrumental in her order's outreach to LGBTQ Catholics. The community was one of 28 groups of religious women that signed a statement of solidarity on Trans Day of Visibility in March. Battista also recently authored an essay in Newsweek titled "I'm a Catholic Nun. I'm Standing Up for Trans People."

St. Joseph Sr. Nancy Corcoran, who describes her ministry as one of "accompaniment" with transgender, intersex and gender-fluid folks, also sees the group positively. She lives and works in Missouri, where lawmakers recently passed bills banning gender-affirming care for minors and participation on sports teams that do not match the biological sex on athletes' birth certificates.

"Living in Missouri with the constant persecution of trans humans, I rejoice with the joy and healing craziness of the Sisters [of Perpetual Indulgence]," she wrote in an

email interview. "Their outfits are off putting and yet they challenge the desire of the few that wish all nuns need to be in habits."

But Sr. Luisa Derouen, a Dominican Sister of Peace who has ministered in the trans community since 1999, has a different opinion, in part, she believes, because she has always found drag shows to be demeaning to women, not entertaining.

> "To me, it feels like dragging my life in the mud. We don't deserve that."
>
> —Dominican Sr. Luisa Derouen
>
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And she finds the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence personally insulting, especially given how actual Catholic sisters have often been at the forefront of supporting LGBTQ people. "Women religious have been, and continue to be, [their] best allies in the Catholic Church," Derouen said.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence "do marvelous work. I don't deny that at all," she said, but her voice cracked as she added, "But why do they do it at our expense? Why do they have to degrade my life to do it? To me, it feels like dragging my life in the mud. We don't deserve that."

Gramick told me that, despite her own offense at their use of garb that is personally meaningful to her, she tries to put herself in the (high-heeled) shoes of the group of drag queens. In the past, she has spoken to members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence on at least two occasions, and learned that many of them have been severely hurt by the institutional church.

Some have been called vermin, told they are going to hell, been thrown out of the confessional or refused funerals, all because of who they are, Gramick said.

"This is their way of expressing their hurt," she said. "My discomfort is nothing compared to what some of these individuals have suffered."

Gramick encourages those who are offended by the group to try to listen and establish a dialogue, rather than organize boycotts and sling more hate on social media.

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I'm not a sister, so I don't have an opinion about them wearing the habit, but some of their antics are definitely meant to mock Christianity. Personally, I'm not offended by that, but I can understand why others are.

It seems to me that, for many of the group's critics though, it's not just the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence's alleged anti-Catholicism that offends — it's their very existence as LGBTQ people. Obviously, that's not true of the sisters interviewed in this article.

In fact, these Catholic sisters — along with the drag queens, the Los Angeles Dodgers and others who celebrate Pride Month — are too often just ammunition in the culture war. For all the right's talk about "defending sisters," when I shared Gramick's letter to the Dodgers on Twitter, I got two or three days of hateful responses directed at her, an actual sister.

And hate is not the answer, as all four of these sisters agreed. Derouen told me that she wants the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to remember that "hating other people never solves anything," but the same advice could be given to some who, in their defense of the faith, are spewing plenty of their own hate.

Said Battista: "I think we forget that the Gospel message is to love your neighbor. No exceptions."

Read this next: Amid 'Perpetual Indulgence'-Dodgers furor, let's talk about real Catholic sisters

A version of this story appeared in the **June 9-22, 2023** print issue under the headline: Actual sisters react to 'Sisters' group.