News



Pro-life advocates recite the rosary during a monthly "Witness for Life" prayer vigil held across the street from a Planned Parenthood center Oct. 6, 2018, in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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On the first Saturday morning of the month a group of Catholics, organized by the Archdiocese of New York, provide a Witness for Life in Manhattan. This group processes from the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral to Planned Parenthood, praying along the way, to counsel and provide resources to women seeking health care about the group's claims of the harms of abortion.

At the same time, an opposing group, which also includes Catholic members, lines the route, trying to slow the procession and offer what they call "clinic defense" for the health care facility. It is a monthly ritual that appears to encapsulate some of the heated opinions, even among Catholics, about the issue of abortion.

Deborah Sucich, a consecrated virgin for the Diocese of Brooklyn, takes part in the Witness for Life event. She told NCR she comes because of the "unity and solidarity that the witness provides between the Body of Christ and the unborn."

Sucich said she typically arrives a little before the witness starts with a Mass in St. Patrick's at 8 a.m., for quiet prayer. And she can already hear people outside forming a picket and making a lot of noise.

"Praying the rosary during [the] procession is a way to continue the Mass," said Sucich.



A woman holds a rosary as she joins other pro-life advocates in reciting the rosary during a monthly "Witness for Life" prayer vigil held across the street from a Planned Parenthood center Oct. 6, 2018, in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

It can take Witness for Life hours to finish this two-block walk due to resistance from NYC For Abortion Rights, or NYCFAR, which attempts to slow the procession. The entire scene is often complicated by the presence of New York police officers, as the procession has gained parade status, allowing a security deployment of officers.

Advocates with the abortion rights group have alleged the police are working inappropriately in coordination with the Witness for Life group.

Since April of this year the police have shifted their tactics, barricading off the entire street and making more arrests, which have made it increasingly difficult for the abortion rights group to slow the procession. In a statement released in December 2022, the group stated that: "The NYPD … regularly shove, elbow and tackle clinic defenders, and obstruct press and legal observers from documenting their brutality."

Asked by NCR about the abortion rights group's complaint, an NYPD spokesperson said via email that the department does not discuss security deployments.

Roger Guthrie, a Catholic member of the abortion rights group, told NCR he thinks "it is impossible to not call [the police presence] excessive."



Supporters of legal abortion demonstrate outside the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral Oct. 6, 2018, in New York City. The demonstration was timed to coincide with a monthly "Witness for Life" Mass celebrated inside the basilica and a subsequent rosary procession to a nearby Planned Parenthood center. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Guthrie, who is from the Midwest but has lived in New York for the past three years, said he learned of this growing conflict through social media. He says he comes to "make sure people who want access to health care can get it that morning without feeling radically intimidated by the procession."

Guthrie pointed out that some far-right extremist groups, such as American Nationalist Initiative and the white nationalist Patriot Front, have been seen in the procession alongside Witness for Life.

Sucich told NCR that Witness for Life is aware of but does not invite these nationalist groups. Franciscan Fr. Lawrence Joseph, an organizer of the procession, also said Witness for Life does not invite those groups. "It is our commitment to maintain the monthly Witness for Life as a purely religious event that is completely independent of any political organizations," he told NCR.

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Bex, who asked not to be named for privacy, is an organizer with NYCFAR who also comes from a Catholic background. They said that they come to the protest primarily to protect patients trying to access the clinic.

"What really grounds me is ... taking care of communities and making sure that people are safe," they said.

Though the former pastor of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, Fr. Brian Graebe, has been vocally supportive of Witness for Life, when asked by NCR about the current connection between the church and Witness for Life, an official at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral declined to comment.

While Witness for Life is expected to continue this procession into the foreseeable future, the abortion rights group has been tabling outside St. Patrick's during the procession to share their perspective with the surrounding community. They are currently circulating a petition to St. Patrick's to stop hosting Witness for Life at their church for this monthly procession.

Geoff Gneuhs, who has been an active member and lector at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral for the past eight years, said that although he is aware of Witness for Life, "No one on Sunday has ever talked about it [Witness for Life], and many are probably not aware."