News



About 60 Catholics gathered for a pray-in outside the White House on Nov. 2. They called for President Joe Biden to support a cease-fire in the Holy Land and pursue diplomacy. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)



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It was noisy outside the White House the afternoon of Nov. 2, All Souls' Day. Tourists milled around as a man wearing a football onesie blasted music. A group of about 60 Catholic protesters gathered, adjusting their speaker to be heard over the din.

They hoped President Joe Biden would hear their prayers for peace in Israel and Palestine and their calls for him to support a cease-fire and pursue diplomacy.

"The evil that started on Oct. 7 with Hamas' attacks on Israeli civilians cannot be justified nor can the military pulverization of innocent civilians in Gaza," Maryknoll Sr. Susan Nchubiri told the crowd.

Since Oct. 7, at least 9,061 people have been killed in Gaza, including more than 3,600 children. At least 1,400 people in Israel were killed in Hamas' attack on Oct. 7.



Maryknoll Sr. Susan Nchubiri, front left, speaks at a pray-in outside the White House on Nov. 2. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

The pray-in included speeches, singing, a litany of saints, a Gospel reading of the beatitudes and a reading of Pope Francis' Angelus prayers for Israel and Palestine.

On Oct. 29, Francis called for a cease-fire, saying, "may space be opened to guarantee humanitarian aid, and may the hostages be released right away. Let no one abandon the possibility that the weapons might be silenced — let there be a cease-fire."

"The pope and I are on the same page," Biden told reporters on Oct. 23. "I laid out to him what the game plan was, how we thought we should be providing the kind of assistance to Israel that [it needs], and the pope was across-the-board supportive."

Eli McCarthy, just peace fellow for the Franciscan Action Network, told NCR it was "disheartening" to see Biden suggest that the pope's cease-fire and peace message was consistent with Biden's support for the Israeli military's invasion and bombing of Gaza.

"It was false for Biden to say he was on the same page as the pope," McCarthy said.

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Multiple protesters called attention to Biden's questioning of the number of Palestinians who have been killed since Israel began retaliatory bombing, calling it "dehumanizing."

"Is one life taken not one life too many?" Nchubiri asked the crowd, calling the Israeli military's actions an "ethnic cleansing."

A small group of the protesters had planned to risk arrest by participating in civil disobedience on the sidewalk in front of the White House, but double rows of fences obstructed Pennsylvania Avenue, making civil disobedience physically more challenging and legally more risky. The fences were removed shortly after the protest ended.

Attempts to reach the White House for comment on the pray-in were unsuccessful.

Philip Farah, a Palestinian Christian born in East Jerusalem represented the Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace at the event.

Farah told the crowd that a relative's house in Gaza had been bombed. "He was inside the house. He managed to crawl out from the rubble."

At least 45% of housing in Gaza has been damaged or destroyed since the Israeli military began bombarding Gaza after Oct. 7.



Julie Schumacher Cohen, right, a member of the Catholic Advisory Council of Churches for Middle East Peace, drove four hours from President Joe Biden's hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, to join the Nov. 2 protest. With her is Jordan Denari Duffner, a scholar of Muslim-Christian relations. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

Farah's relatives took shelter at St. Porphyrios church, Farah said. "After he survived the bombing of his home, he did not survive that bombing. He was one of the 18 who were killed," Farah said.

"Parents are taking to writing the names of their children in magic marker on their legs, so if they are buried under the rubble, they can be identified," Farah said. "Parents are losing their children under the rubble, under the bombs, and they don't even have a memory of these children because their photographs, their cellphones, and anything that has any recollection of their children is disappearing."

As the pray-in wrapped up, another protester shared their family's experiences with the war with NCR.

Julie Schumacher Cohen, a Catholic and member of the Catholic Advisory Council of Churches for Middle East Peace, drove four hours from Biden's hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, to join the protest.

Schumacher Cohen's mother is an Israeli Jew, and she made friends with Palestinian Christians when she studied in Jerusalem. "There's no military solution to Israel-Palestine. It has to be through a just peace," Shumacher Cohen told NCR.

She said she was concerned that the Israeli military's bombardment of Gaza was killing Gaza civilians and could be killing Israeli hostages that Hamas is holding captive.

Schumacher Cohen described her Israeli family as "shocked," "traumatized" and "very afraid" in the wake of Hamas' Oct . 7 attacks. "It was definitely conjuring up some of the worst memories for people of that existential experience that all Jewish people have of the Holocaust and of the pogroms," she said.

Schumacher Cohen said she also knows the forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza has been evoking memories of the Nakba, when Zionist militias killed thousands of Palestinians and Palestinians were expelled from their homes in 1948.

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"Life can calm down for Israelis, and it can kind of be normal, but it's never really normal for Palestinians because of the realities of occupation and blockades," she said.

Jordan Denari Duffner, a scholar of Muslim-Christian relations who was at the event with the Catholic Advisory Council of Churches for Middle East Peace, told the crowd it was important to come to the pray-in because too many Catholics have been silent on the issue, forgetting the suffering of Christians in the Holy Land, many in Palestine, and the values of Catholic faith.

"As Christians, we also recommit ourselves to opposing antisemitism and Islamophobia in all its forms. We know that we have often failed in this regard, both historically and today," Denari Duffner added.

"Some in our Christian communities, as well as others, have wrongly labeled all Palestinians and Muslims as terrorists and have wrongly associated all Jews and Israelis with the actions of the Israeli government," she said. "Ideas like these are wrong. They are the basis for more violence."

Many Catholic organizations that work on peace issues co-sponsored the event, including Catholic Advisory Council of Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), Franciscan Action Network, Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Pax Christi USA, Quixote Center, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team, the Isaiah Project, the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker and the Assisi Community.

Before the final song, Art Laffin of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker house in Washington, D.C., led the crowd in a Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer in solidarity with children at Holy Family parish in Gaza, who recorded a video praying the same prayers as falling bombs were heard in the background.

Judy Coode, communications director for Pax Christi USA, told NCR, "It's so upsetting when we can't physically be there to help the wounded or bury the dead or shelter people, so we do what we can."