News



A group of Catholic activists block the entrance to the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City on Nov. 30. (Felton Davis)



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A group of Catholic activists blocked the entrance to the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City on Nov. 30, drawing attention to its lack of participation in UN meetings discussing nuclear disarmament that week.

This nonviolent direct action took place during the Nov. 27-Dec. 1 meeting of the nations who are party to the UN's Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the first legally binding international agreement to prohibit nuclear arms.

Those gathered for the action included the Atlantic Life Community, Catholic Worker communities, NukeWatch, and War Resisters League.

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The group met together at the Isaiah Wall — a monument near the UN headquarters inscribed with the famous quotation "They shall beat their swords into plowshares" — before processing toward the U.S. Mission to the UN. At the front of the group, they held aloft a sign that read "Everything to do with nuclear weapons now illegal," referencing the 50-plus countries who have ratified the nuclear prohibition treaty.

The activists clearly called upon their Catholic faith throughout the action, as another sign featured a quote from Pope Francis: "The use of Nuclear Weapons as well as their mere possession is immoral."

Upon arrival at the U.S. Mission, these groups created a human blockade of all three public entrances to the building.

Steve Baggarly, a co-founder and member of the Norfolk Catholic Worker, was one of 18 arrested that day for disorderly conduct. Baggarly told NCR that the action was to draw attention to the fact that the U.S. Mission allegedly refused to send anyone, even as an observer, to the meetings discussing the treaty that week. Baggarly said, "That inspires a blockade to disrupt business as usual, to be in opposition to their opposition."



A group of Catholic activists place large sticker posters on the walls of the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City on Nov. 30, which read "US Sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." (Felton Davis)

Baggarly said he was inspired both by his faith and by the urgency to take action towards nuclear disarmament, stating: "These weapons threaten everything God created out of love. They are in the nuclear crossheirs."

Those who blocked the main entrance to the building held a banner which read "we are here not to break the law but to uphold the law." While blockading the entrances, the activists placed large sticker posters to the walls of the U.S. Mission, which read "US Sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," "Disarm, Disarm," and they even posted the entire treaty text on the flagpole.

The purpose of these stickers was to "put the message up on the building, and to have it stick" stated Ellen Grady, a lifelong Catholic who is a part of the Catholic Worker movement.

Grady shared that her involvement with this action is driven by her faith, stating: "I feel like it's not that complicated to live out your faith, and loving one another does not mean that you build weapons to destroy all of creation."

As the blockade ensued outside, an announcement was made inside the U.S. Mission through the loudspeakers that this was a "a situation of civil unrest" and told those in the building to "shelter in place." An NCR request to the U.S. mission for comment on the action did not immediately receive a response.



Martha Hennessy, a member of the New York Catholic worker and granddaughter of Dorothy Day, was one of 18 activists arrested after blocking the entrance to the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City on Nov. 30. (Felton Davis)

Many participants in the action were together the evening before to attend a Mass celebrated by Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester, at the Church of Our Savior on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the death of Dorothy Day, one of the co-founders of the Catholic Worker movement.

In his homily, Wester stated: "I believe that the Catholic Church, however imperfectly we follow our savior Jesus Christ, should take up nuclear disarmament as a critical pro-life issue."

Martha Hennessy, a member of the New York Catholic worker and granddaughter of Day, emphasized the importance of having this action aligned with the anniversary of Day's death. Calling upon Day's strong voice toward nuclear disarmament, Hennessy stated, "She [Dorothy] had a clear understanding of the mystical body of Christ, that we are all one of another."

"If we are to try to follow the gospel teachings, it's very simple. You are against war, nevermind nuclear war. You are against all war." Hennessy stated.

Hennessy, who was one of the 18 arrested, said she felt it important to take part in the action because, "You can't just talk about it, you have to put your body in the places where these things are happening to oppose them."



Bud Courtney, a member of the New York Catholic Worker, leads Catholic activists in song playing his guitar in front of the entrance to the United States Mission to the

United Nations in New York City on Nov. 30. (Felton Davis)

Throughout the blockade, which lasted over two hours, there were a number of people standing alongside the sidewalk and supporting those doing the blockade. These people were leafleting, shouting "Sign the Treaty!," "No More Nukes," and singing songs.

As the New York Police Department began to move in to make arrests, Bud Courtney, a member of the New York Catholic Worker, led everyone in song playing his guitar as they were being arrested, singing "All we are saying is give peace a chance."