

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 7, 2009 at 2:14pm

Annual SOA teach-in moving to DC

by Joshua J. McElwee



People place crosses and other memorials on the gate outside Fort Benning during the vigil Nov. 22. -- NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee

COLUMBUS, GA. -- The School of the Americas Watch vigil, held each November here, draws some 10,000 to the gates of the Fort Benning Army complex for a weekend of talks and teach-ins, ending with a solemn march on the base.

Aging 1960s Vietnam War protesters mixed with thousands of Jesuit-inspired and -educated college and high school students Nov. 20-22. They arrived on buses and in carpools from across the nation for a mix of justice and peace education, bonding and vision building.

Next year, however, this nearly two-decade-long autumn ritual is likely to change.

Speaking to an audience of college and high school students from around the country Nov. 21, Ignatian Solidarity Network executive director Ann Magovern announced that the annual Ignatian Family Teach-in for Justice, a major component of the weekend activity, would be moving next year to Washington, D.C.

Held in Columbus every year since 1997, the two-day teach-in commemorates the deaths of the Salvadoran Jesuit martyrs and supports the annual School of the Americas Watch vigil at the gates of Fort Benning.

Acknowledging that the teach-in has a long history connected with Columbus, Magovern said it was time for a new chapter to be written for the Ignatian family.

“Much like the disciples in the story of the Transfiguration, we cannot pitch our tent on top of the mountain forever,” said Magovern. “We cannot pitch our tent in Columbus forever because we are being asked to pay attention to the needs and injustices of our day and move toward them in faith and in action and in responsiveness.”

In a press statement, Jesuit Fr. Charles Currie said the move would provide new opportunities for the Ignatian Solidarity Network.

“The proximity to our country’s lawmakers and the centrality of the location for our teach-in participants makes Washington an ideal setting for the ISN’s bold social justice goals, which include shutting down the SOA,” said Currie, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.

Founded in 1990 by Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, SOA Watch has every year since held a vigil outside the gates of Fort Benning. The vigil is to call attention to the training of soldiers from Latin America at what used to be called the School of the Americas and is now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Over the past 12 years the teach-in has helped the vigil grow in popularity among young people, leading to crowds estimated at 25,000 in previous years. The vigil culminates with people packing the street outside the gate to the fort, processing toward the fence to the military base and leaving crosses or other memorial items in remembrance.

SOA Watch organizer Eric LeCompte told NCR that he is hopeful that college and high school students who came to the annual vigil through the teach-in will continue to come in support, even without that network.

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“Many of the students that come year after year are going to keep on coming to the vigil,” said LeCompte. “We expect many of those folks to continue being with us at the gates. The reality is that we’re going to continue what we’ve been doing. As every year I expect our numbers to again increase next year.”

Despite the uncertainty about the future of the vigil, people who came to the weekend of events were still visibly moved and dedicated to the cause of closing down the Army school.

Addressing an audience of her peers on the second day of the teach-in, sophomore Elizabeth Reid of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo., said she felt “called to something much greater than sympathy towards those who are still victims of SOA violence.”

“While we may not be able to stand in solidarity with the people of Latin America by directly changing their loss, we can certainly stand in solidarity with them by changing our own country, right here, right now,” said Reid.

Buddhist Sr. Denise Laffin, of an order called Nipponzan Myohoji, arrived after a weeklong walk with others from Lumpkin, Ga., where the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Stewart Detention Center is located.

"We felt that this is where the injustice happens with immigration inside our borders, where SOA is the injustice perpetuated against poor outside our borders, so we felt there's a link between the two and that's why we wanted to walk there and then come here," said Laffin.

Mercy Sr. Elaine Deasy said she came because Mercy sisters "want to speak out, want to let people know that it's not all right to continue. It is not all right to persecute. It is not all right to terrorize and torture."

"It touches me more than anything to see the thousand of students, especially to see the youth because they're getting it," said Deasy, who came to the vigil from Connecticut with students from St. Joseph's College in Hartford. "There was a little kid who was probably 7 or 8 who asked when we were going to the gate. He was really excited to be going to the gate at Fort Benning."

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