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Nationwide vigils aim to demonstrate solidarity with sisters

by Alice Popovici



Protesters gather in front of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' building in Washington, D.C., on May 8, in support of Catholic sisters. (Photos by Ted Majdosz)

From Alaska to South Texas, to Washington, D.C., people gathered outside Catholic churches and cathedrals in about a dozen cities earlier this month to pray, sing and show support for the American nuns criticized in a recent Vatican report.

Organizers of the vigils say they hope these acts of solidarity will inspire the Vatican to rescind the document that places the Leadership Conference of Women Religious under the authority of an archbishop -- a move that has left many bewildered and angry.

"It was a very prayerful spirit," said Jennifer Reyes Lay, who works for Catholic Action Network, describing a May 8 vigil she organized in St. Louis, where about 40 people gathered at the Cathedral Basilica to share stories about the sisters who touched their lives. "At the same time," Reyes Lay said, "you could tell, when they got up and shared their stories, people were upset."

Nancy Barrett-Dennehy, a retired teacher, organized a vigil that drew about 70 people, including a couple of priests, to St. Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Ore., on May 8. "This is important," she said. "We have to take a stand."

In Lansing, Mich., about 10 people came out to St. Mary Cathedral with signs that read "Support the Sisters" and "We Thirst for Justice," according to Jackie MacKinnon, a retired lawyer who was there.

"I believe that there is a widespread feeling, on the part of Catholics and non-Catholics, that the sisters are not being treated properly by the Vatican," said MacKinnon, who has written a letter in support of sisters to the pastors of more than a dozen parishes. "I would love to see the Vatican rescind its decree."

The events began to crop up across the country in the first week of May as members of Catholic groups learned of a grass-roots effort to organize nationwide vigils every Tuesday leading up to May 29, the beginning of LCWR's first meeting to discuss the Vatican action (the movement is led by the Nun Justice Project, a coalition of Catholic groups). More vigils were added after the first week as people reached out to their networks, and more were in the planning stages as this story was being written.



On May 10, more than 1,000 people, including a couple hundred

nuns, packed Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago for a prayer service celebrating women religious that had been planned before news came out of the report criticizing LCWR, according to Mercy Sr. Susan Sanders.

Sanders, a professor and senior administrator at a Chicago-area college, described a service filled with moving testimonials, one of which drew a sustained round of applause.

"People were stomping on the floor of the church, they were whistling, they were cheering," Sanders said. "Some of our sisters were crying."

The first round of weekly vigils, which also included Boston (30 people); San Juan, Texas (15 people); Louisville, Ky. (78 people); and Anchorage, Alaska (16 people), were described by organizers as peaceful and reflective.

The 75 people who attended the event in Washington, D.C., near the front of entrance of the headquarters of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops were surprised to find the sign at the entrance of the office building wrapped in a tarp, according to organizer Erin Saiz Hanna. The bishops' conference later confirmed that it had wrapped the sign in anticipation of the vigil.

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Hanna, who is executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, said she sees "the tide turning,"

saying that several bishops' conference staff members honked in support of the protesters and gave them thumbs-up signs.

The report issued by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was the proverbial 'straw that broke the camel's back,' said Eileen Sammon, a retired teacher from Ossining, N.Y., who is trying to organize a local group to attend a vigil in New York City.

'It's easier to batter the sisters instead of looking into their own selves,' Sammon said of the church hierarchy. 'It is shameful and unconscionable to have something like this occur.'

Blanche Crandall, a retired teacher who organized the vigils in Anchorage, is also trying to mobilize people in her community.

'We need to speak out, and I think that Catholics are beginning to feel that around here,' she said, 'and across the country, too.'

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Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly named one of the cities where vigils took place in May. A vigil has not taken place in Oakland, Calif., as of this writing, but is scheduled for May 29.

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