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Two hundred gather in Oakland to show support for sisters

by Monica Clark



People gathered at a prayer vigil to support sisters at the Cathedral of Christ the Light in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday offer a blessing to sisters who attended. (Pat Brock)

OAKLAND, Calif. -- About 200 people standing in front of the Cathedral of Christ the Light extended their right arms in a gesture of blessing for the two dozen sisters gathered among them at the close of a May 29 prayer vigil for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which is under attack from the Vatican.

The evening vigil, one of many held as the LCWR began an administrative session to determine how to respond to the Vatican, drew active parishioners, disaffected Catholics, several priests, some Buddhists and a retired Lutheran pastor. All were bound together by respect for the women religious who had touched their lives and for the sisters who are active in various works of social justice. Many said they are angry about the Vatican's criticism of LCWR, which represents about 80 percent of all women religious in the U.S.

"I'm here because the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange gave me a great foundation in social justice," said Sharon Duggan, an Oakland attorney. She was delighted to find among the participants a sister who had taught her in high school.

Gwen Watson, a member of Christ the King Parish in Pleasant Hill, told the gathering, "In attacking the sisters who are working on behalf of the poor, the bishops are hurting the poor."

Many attendees held homemade signs ranging from "Our Church will heal when the sisters are in charge" to "Stop bullying the sisters."

Redemptorist Father Donald MacKinnon of Berkeley said he came because "the Church teaches that every human person is to be respected. Every nun is deserving of respect."

Instead of using a microphone during the 60-minute prayer service, the vigil organizers borrowed a communication technique of the Occupy movement, in which each phrase of a speaker is repeated by the crowd. As various women told of the courageous acts of sisters, their words reverberated down the street, punctuated regularly by the honking of car horns by drivers in solidarity with the group.

There were songs and a litany of affirmation for the varied ministries of women religious with the refrain "Rejoice and be glad." Participants also called out the names of women religious they wanted to honor, including author Joan Chittister, Simone Campbell of Network, Dorothy Stang, who was murdered in Brazil, and Maura Clarke, who was assassinated in El Salvador.

Presentation Sister Marilyn Medau, of St. Mary's Center in Oakland, said she was "deeply touched by the support of so many" for women religious and especially for LCWR. It was "prayerful and beautiful."

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