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Religious community publicly backs embattled Sr. Elizabeth Johnson

Joshua J. McElwee | Jul. 14, 2011

St. Joseph Sr. Joyce DeShano; Kimberly Ritter-Videmschek, of Nix Conference and Meeting Management; Dominic Smart, general manager of the Millennium Hotel; and St. Joseph Sr. Kathy McCluskey, executive director of the U.S. Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph; pose at the signing July 12.

The U.S. federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph publicly backed embattled member Elizabeth Johnson yesterday, whose book *Quest for the Living God* was sharply criticized by the U.S. bishops? conference doctrine committee in April.

The public statement of support came as some 900 members of the order met in St. Louis for a once-every-five-year gathering to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the congregation in the United States. They also announced the completion of discussions by the order with a landmark hotel that led to an agreement to stem human trafficking.

?As we gather on this 175th anniversary ? we stand with and for Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ ? theologian, leader, scholar, researcher, teacher, author, speaker, colleague -- and most importantly, our sister,? reads the statement, which according to St. Joseph Sr. Joanne Gallagher was approved ?by a standing ovation.? Gallagher spoke with *NCR* by phone July 14.

?[Johnson] exemplifies the very mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph throughout history, ?that all may be one,? continues the statement, which is available on the sisters? Web site [1].

The federation also announced Tuesday the successful completion of a two-year collaboration effort with the Millennium Hotel St. Louis, where the sisters? gathering was held July 9-13, which culminated in the hotel preparing to sign onto a wide-ranging agreement to help prevent human trafficking.

The agreement, signed Tuesday between the hotel and a network of organizations known as Ending Child Prostitution and Trafficking-USA (ECPAT), mandates that the hotel follow six guidelines to prevent trafficking, including training personnel in how to prevent the practice and placing a clause in all contracts with suppliers to repudiate it.

Gallagher, the director of communications for the Boston congregation of the St. Joseph Sisters, said discussions with the hotel first came together as the sisters? federation was deciding where to host its gathering two years ago. While discussing logistics with several different hotels, the sisters realized many ?did not know very much, if anything about human trafficking.?

At that point, Gallagher said, the gathering?s planning committee decided to use the opportunity to educate on the issue and try to use it as a way of ?corporate witness? to ?get to the root of the problem.?

Following a series of conversations between the sisters and the hotel, ECPAT?s executive director, Carol Smolenski, told *NCR* the hotel submitted an application to be included as signers on the advocacy group?s ?Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism,? which was created in 1998 and has been signed by more than 1,000 companies world-wide.

We were initally ?shocked and skeptical that they would actually sign it,? said Smolenski, as there have been ?few American companies that have been willing to sign the agreement.?

But, said Smolenski, the ?sisters carried the ball the whole way. They carried forth the whole discussion.?

The executive director said the agreement is particularly important for hotels to sign, as many traffickers use hotel rooms for prostitution.

?They need to train their staffs about what to look for,? she said.

After Tuesday?s announcement, Gallagher said the nine members of the planning committee went to the hotel?s basement to visit with maintenance and housekeeping staff. As they entered one of the rooms, she said the staff ?burst out into applause.?

?To see that -- I was just in tears,? she said.

Although the collaborative effort only included one hotel in St. Louis, Gallagher said its impact will ?reach all over the world? because of the support of Nix Conference & Meeting Management, a St. Louis based company that helped organize the sisters? gathering. The company?s Web site says the company helps plan conferences ?on four continents.?

?The collaboration and the potential for continuing this conversation?.through the hotel industry has been both humbling and beyond our imagination,? said Gallagher.

The sisters? support of Johnson, a Fordham University professor, is the latest in a months-long saga surrounding her book.

The bishops? doctrine committee in late March, after studying Johnson?s book for a year, concluded it ?does not accord with authentic Catholic teaching on essential points? and ?completely undermines the Gospel and the faith of those who believe in the Gospel.?

Johnson responded to the bishops? letter June 1 with a 38-page letter strenuously defending the orthodoxy of her book, writing that it was ?thoroughly misunderstood and consistently misrepresented in the committee?s statement.?

At the U.S. bishops? annual meeting in Bellevue, Wash., June 15, Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, executive

director of the bishops? secretariat for doctrine, said the bishops would study Johnson?s response ?very thoroughly,? but a formal response could take ?months.?

Gallagher said the national federation waited to make its statement until the annual gathering so they ?could do this in a public way,? with Johnson?s fellow sisters present.

She also noted that the statement was approved by the federation?s leadership council, which represents 7,000 vowed members and 2,800 associates in the U.S.

Earlier in the gathering, sisters focused on the theme ?zeal for healing the neighborhood of God?s sacred universe.?

Among several keynote presentations were those by St. Joseph Sr. Cathy Nerney, titled ?The Horizons of Our Zeal: Toward a World at One,? and by author Margaret Wheatley, titled ?Beyond Hope and Fear: The Liberating Energy of Zeal.?

In her presentation, which is available on the sisters? Web site [2], Nerney, an associate professor of religious studies at Chestnut Hill College, asked those gathered to answer three questions when considering the future of the order:

1. ?Will we deepen our capacity to see more contemplatively? Will we open ourselves to receive the gift and nurture the vision of life in communion??
2. ?Are we ready to judge more connectedly from a deeper awareness of our Relational Connectivity? Will we put on the Mind of Christ by harnessing the best of our divine/human intelligence??
3. ?Are we willing to act compassionately in solidarity with all in need? Will we love with the Heart of Christ -- in the pattern of total self-giving for the sake of Life??

Nerney?s paper concludes: ?We?ve come together here to touch into the fiery zeal of our original American foundation; where we go from here will be proportionate to the love of God that fills our hearts. May that love reflect the pattern of Jesus? own; that others may say of us what the first disciples said of him: ?Indeed, zeal for God?s House consumes them.??

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer.]

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