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From Oregon to Ohio, a swell of support for Catholic sisters

Sharon Abercrombie | May. 3, 2012

More than 50 people gathered April 25 outside the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City in support of LCWR. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

St. Andrew parishioners in Portland, Ore., are making no secret about it: They love the sisters.

They demonstrated their support during a parish liturgy April 22, when Fr. Leo Remington, the celebrant, opened the prayers of the faithful with the following: "For women religious in the U.S. and throughout the world, in thanksgiving for their service to the church and world, may we stand in solidarity with them during these turbulent times, we pray."

If the local sisters in attendance were touched by Remington's recognition at that juncture, they were soon to discover there was more to come. At the end of mass, Remington, a retired priest and parish member, invited women religious to come forward and asked all in the assembly to raise both hands in blessing over them.

His prayer: "As the community of St. Andrew, we are called to serve one another: to bring the good news to the

poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor. You and countless women religious who serve and have served the church have modeled this for a broken and fragile world."

Then the message became more specific, targeting the unfolding crisis of the Vatican crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the thousands of sisters they represent.

"Now in light of an often misguided and oppressive leadership in the church, we stand in solidarity with you and all women religious in the church. May you continue to 'love tenderly, act justly and walk humbly with God.'" Both prayers were crafted by a parishioner, who asked to remain anonymous.

The resulting applause for the three sisters who came forward -? two Holy Names sisters and one Dominican sister -? went on for five minutes, said Jackie Rossini and Sharon Bishop. There were tears and hugs.

"I am so proud to belong to St. Andrew parish," Bishop wrote in an email.

There are eight to 10 sisters who are members of St. Andrew, but their own ministries often take place on weekends, which means they cannot always attend Sunday liturgy.

In terms of the tribute to sisters, April 22 was only the beginning.

This past Sunday, when people walked through the church doors, they were greeted by a picture wall of support. The parish archivist had displayed 40 photographs of sisters who have served St. Andrew during its 102-year history. Pens and felt markers were available to write words of encouragement and, if possible, to identify the ones in older photographs.

Meanwhile, that night, One Spirit - One Call, a women's support organization that reaches out to the entire diocese, threw a potluck birthday party in the parish center to honor St. Catherine of Siena, a woman who spoke truth to papal power in her own day. Postcards of support were on hand to sign and send to sisters whose communities are members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said Rossini, a founding member and secretary of One Spirit's board. The event drew 95 women and men, "25 more than we expected," Rossini said.

She and other parishioners organized One Spirit two years ago, after an Irish woman, Jennifer Sleeman, asked all women in Ireland to stay home from Mass on Sept. 26, 2010, the week of her 81st birthday, to raise awareness of the unjust and unfair treatment of women in the Catholic church. Sleeman's request had been prompted by the Vatican's decision to include ordination of women in a list of "grave offenses that also names such sins as pedophilia."

Many women at St. Andrew were moved by Sleeman's plea, and the result was One Spirit ? One Call. The group's website says the organization "is a response to the Spirit moving in the Catholic Church today. We are women who embrace the vision of a Church that truly honors the gifts of all its members. We are not leaving: We choose to remain in the church, working to see our vision realized."

Their first event, held in September 2010 in downtown Portland, drew more than 600 people from 54 parishes. In July, they sponsored a celebration of Mary of Magdala, the first woman called by Jesus to serve the community, with a liturgy, followed by a "Hunting for Mary" celebration with prayer, music sharing and reflection. It drew 84 people from 24 area parishes.

Similar pockets of progressiveness and push-back to the Vatican move have surfaced elsewhere, as already reported by the *National Catholic Reporter* this week.

Irene Woodward, a retired philosophy professor at Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif., and a parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes, said the push-backs are "really exciting."

"The whole world seems to be up in arms over the sisters," she said. "Even my niece, who converted to Judaism, wrote and said that the pope should go back and read the Bible."

On April 27, the guest homilist at Lourdes, a retired diocesan priest, characterized the sisters as "good shepherds" leading the church. He also read from a proposed petition supporting the sisters and said he would bring it this coming Sunday for people to sign.

Postcard writing to bishops and a scheduled movie spotlighting the sisters' work are on the minds of the Emmaus Faith Community, an intentional eucharistic group that meets at St. Patrick's Episcopal Church in Kenwood, Calif., near Santa Rosa.

Cindy Vrooman, a former sister and retired teacher, is the group's co-founder. She said Emmaus will sponsor a showing of "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America," a documentary produced by the LCWR, at 7 p.m. May 11 at St. Patrick's Church. Vrooman asks people to bring their favorite stories of sisters who influenced them. She said, "I was a Catholic nun for 15 years and they will remain my heroes."

Vrooman said there will be holy cards on hand describing ways to support the sisters and bumper stickers proclaiming, "Catholic sisters are our heroes." Postcards designed by Catholics United will be available to send to all the bishops in California.

The Emmaus community has a worship community of 35 regular members with a mailing list of 100.

"We are an older church congregation, but we do not mind," Vroonan said. "We just pray, support each other and do good works." She said they have donated to 41 different organizations over the years.

Emmaus is made up of members who welcomed the ecumenical council in the 1960s for its hope and promise.

"It was an exciting adventure that was too abruptly abandoned," Vroonan said. "Now our church is moving to the right, to a more patriarchal structure, excluding many from governance positions, from the priesthood, and even from the communion line. Before the election of Pope Benedict XVI we felt like aliens in our own pews. After the election, we became pilgrims."

Another pilgrim group, Simply Catholic in Columbus, Ohio, will meet Sunday to discuss coming up with donations for the LCWR.

"They may need to hire canon lawyers or even civil lawyers through this process," said Marie Sweeney, a former sister who founded the group six years ago.

She suggested that "those of us who (also) worship in institutional settings might consider placing a note in the collection basket, simply stating that we are directing contributions to LCWR as a matter of justice. "

Sweeney said it is important to remember that the LCWR represents "'sisters,' ministerial congregations, not 'nuns,'" who are cloistered. Misidentifying these sisters is a part of Rome's problem, she said.

The leader of Simply Catholic said she has been pulled to commitment amidst "this sacred chaos, because LCWR actually leads with authority. These women do the work of justice, know the women who have experienced or consider abortions, deal with budgets and car maintenance, like normal folks. When they speak with the authority of their own lives and their lived experience of Vatican II's spirit, Americans listen."

The bottom line, Sweeney said, is the specter of bishops and Rome floundering "because they have lost integrity and thus, authority. The only thing they have left is power. Certainly, they are threatened by women who gracefully lead, and lead with real authority, thus making the male institutions look small and petty by comparison."

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