NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Master of Divinity student organizes vigil to support sisters

Monica Clark | May. 10, 2012

OAKLAND, Calif. -- "I love women religious," said Christine Haider-Winnett, a 29-year-old graduate student at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley who is organizing a May 29 vigil at Oakland's Cathedral of Christ the Light to show support for U.S. sisters in light of the recent Vatican mandate.

"To me, sisters are the best example of how to live Christ's teachings in our terribly broken world," she said. "They have given me a place in the church and hope for the church when not much else has. I feel like this is the least I could do to thank them."

The prayer vigil is one of nearly two dozen being organized around the country through the Nun Justice Project [1], a group of Catholic organizations offering support for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) as it deals with a mandate from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to reform its statutes, programs and affiliations to conform more closely to "the teachings and discipline of the Church."

The weekly vigils, most of which are taking place in front of local cathedrals, are being held every Tuesday through May 29 when LCWR's officers will meet to discuss their response to the Vatican action.

"This is such an important time to surround women religious with love and support," said Haider-Winnett, who started wearing a button that said "I heart women religious" after learning of the April 18 appointment by the Vatican of a three-bishop panel to oversee LCWR with the power to review and revise the organization's policies and practices. LCWR represents about 80 percent of the 57,000 sisters in the U.S.

"If there's one silver lining in this whole terrible mess, it's that the doctrinal assessment has given us an opportunity to really thank sisters for all that they've done for our church," Haider-Winnett said. "I think that we sort of took them for granted for a long time, but this gives us an opportunity to really see them for the incredible ministers that they are."

Haider-Winnett was a young teenager grieving the death of a close friend when she met a sister who helped her sort through her sorrow and, in the process, put her on a path to ministry. "She ministered to me when I really needed it, and was one of the first models for me of what a woman's ministry could look like."

The sister encouraged her to read the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, which "totally changed my life."

She became involved in social justice ministries, later organizing with faith-based nonprofits and meeting "a lot of really incredible women religious" through the Catholic Worker movement, Latin American solidarity groups, and church reform work.

"I don't think the institutional church realizes how important it is for women -- especially young women -- to have role models, and to be ministered to by someone who looks like them," she said. "That's one very important role that women religious serve in the Catholic church. If they were to disappear, I don't think I could stay in the church, and I think that's true of a lot of laywomen."

Haider-Winnett, a lifelong Catholic and active parishioner, is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree in Berkeley and serves on the Board of Directors of the Women's Ordination Conference. She is organizing the vigil as an individual and not as part of the Women's Ordination Conference, she said.

She sees the Vatican action towards LCWR as "emblematic of the way our hierarchy silences women's voices."

"The doctrinal assessment proves that they aren't simply barring us from the right to preside over the Eucharist. They are forbidding us from forming ministries and spiritualities that are authentic to our own lived experience.

"When bishops call themselves the authentic teachers of faith and morals what they are really saying is that women fundamentally lack the right to make any personal moral or spiritual discernments," she added. "They are saying that our only role is to pray to a male God in a way that has been taught to us by a male authority. That is an affront to all Catholic women, not just women religious."

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