

Support for LCWR drives monthly California vigils

Monica Clark | May. 13, 2013

Santa Rosa, Calif.

As the bells of St. Eugene Cathedral tolled for evening Mass on Tuesday and two Marian Sisters of Santa Rosa in long white habits and blue veils hurried into the Adoration Chapel for the traditional Latin liturgy, 18 men and women formed a circle in front of the cathedral to pray for members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

They have held this monthly vigil since LCWR came under strong criticism by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in April 2012 for what the doctrinal congregation called "radical feminism." LCWR represents about 80 percent of the some 57,000 sisters in the United States.

When the criticism was first made public, supporters of sisters throughout the country held vigils and demonstrations, but the small band in Santa Rosa has continued that effort, meeting each first Tuesday outside the cathedral. They pray, sing and tell stories about specific sisters who nurtured their faith, showed compassion for the poor and confronted injustice.

During the Tuesday vigil, Therese Mughannam-Walrath recounted her family's arrival in San Francisco as Palestinian refugees when she was 10.

"My father visited every Catholic school in the city seeking enrollment for me, and because the term had already started, he was told there was no room. But a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet welcomed us to St. Emydius School," she said. "It was the beginning of our life in America."

During each hourlong vigil, the group highlights 20 LCWR members in a litany of remembrance. The Carondelet Sisters were among the congregations recognized at the May vigil.

Vigil participants also sign a letter to all the congregations honored at each vigil.

"Be assured that we are one with you in spirit and in hope," the letter reads. "We pray that you follow your hearts and keep your community tradition alive and vibrant. You are not alone as you discern your response to the allegations made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

When the group gathers next month, they will have sent a letter of support to 178 congregations that are part of LCWR.

"We are most grateful," wrote the Sisters of St. Francis in Syracuse, N.Y., in a recent response. "Your prayers and support remind us that we work together as a wider community."

Sr. Mary Gehringer, provincial of the Servants of Mary in Omaha, Neb., also expressed gratitude, especially that the group "took the time to single out communities and lift them particularly in prayer."

"I believe that one of our most important tasks as religious communities was that of training others to continue

the Gospel mission," she wrote. "Knowing people like you lets us know that we have done this well and that the Church is in good hands. ... We are privileged to stand with you."

Cynthia Vrooman of neighboring Sonoma, Calif., organized the first local show of support for LCWR with fellow members of Emmaus, "an inclusive Catholic community" that meets twice a month for a Eucharistic celebration and potluck supper. They held a public viewing of the documentary "[Women in Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America](#) [1]" in May 2012 and raised \$1,000 for LCWR. From that event grew the plan for monthly vigils, which Vrooman and her husband, Dan, have been coordinating ever since.

In a letter [published in *The Sonoma Index-Tribune*](#) [2] shortly after the doctrinal congregation's decree against LCWR, Vrooman wrote, "If the hierarchy is willing to sacrifice its most dedicated work force (of Sisters) on the altar of blind obedience, then many of us should get ready to stand in line."

And they have. Up to 50 people have attended the monthly vigils. When that yearlong effort ends in June, the group says it will discern its next step, likely dependent on how the current situation between women religious and the Vatican evolves.

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[1] <http://www.womenandspirit.org/>

[2] <http://www.sonomanews.com/News-2012/Silencing-the-nuns-is-a-local-concern/>

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