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Justice vigils for LCWR unite the church reform movement

Jamie Manson | Jun. 11, 2012 Grace on the Margins

Those wondering what the laity's response to the LCWR crisis might mean for the future of the church justice movement needed only look at the front steps of New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral on the very warm evening of May 29.

More than 150 people gathered to hold a vigil in honor of women religious. The vigil was part of a movement spearheaded by Nun Justice, which called for peaceful protests at cathedrals throughout the country on three consecutive Tuesdays in the month of May.

Other vigils were equally successful, but the turnout at St. Patrick's was remarkable for a region that only successfully created a Call to Action chapter in 2011. Although New York is regarded as one of the most forward-looking cities in the United States, its brand of Catholicism has remained remarkably traditional.

Witness, for example, that in Manhattan, tens of thousands still stream through the cathedral on big feast days like Ash Wednesday, and the archbishop of New York is typically something of a local celebrity.

When Archbishop Timothy Dolan was elevated to cardinal in February, local new stations broadcasted the liturgy live from the Vatican. An even greater spectacle could be seen at the construction site of One World Trade Center, where for two weeks in February the tower's white lights were turned "cardinal red" to fete the church's newly anointed prince.

Hearing the crowd make impassioned demands of Dolan just outside the doors of his liturgical domain felt like a strong wind of change on that oppressively humid May evening.

Of course, it's not that the island of Manhattan is devoid of justice-oriented, Vatican II Catholics. For decades, most liberal Catholics could find several parishes where they could be spiritually fed, so there wasn't as strong a need for a formal church reform group.

But in the past few years, the culture of fear has reached even the most prophetic parishes, where allowing women to preach regularly or the public affirmation of LGBT rights was once the norm.

"Progressive parishes were oases, but the oases are shrinking," said Jeff Stone, director of media relations for DignityUSA and a longtime activist and member of Dignity's New York chapter.

"I really think that the Vatican's pointing the finger at the nuns, so many of whom have been living examples Jesus' companioning 'the least of these,' just tipped the scale for many, many Catholics," said Nancy Lorence, who serves as secretary of the newly formed CTA Metro NY chapter.

Perhaps what was most powerful about this vigil was diversity of the "many Catholics" who showed up. While members of church reform organizations share similar concerns and goals, outside of a national Call to Action meeting, it is unusual to see them all in the same place, united in a single cause. Everyone on the broad spectrum of the church justice movement seemed to be at the cathedral.

Members of Dignity New York, which was expelled from the Church of St. Francis Xavier 25 years ago, marched alongside members of the gay and lesbian ministries that still exist at the parish. A female priest from the Roman Catholic Womenpriests joined the crowd, along with members of the local chapter of Voice of the Faithful.

Members of small, intentional Catholic communities marched with organizers from FutureChurch. Old Catholic priests chanted and prayed with women religious. Members of the Catholic Worker stood alongside a contingent of women from a local Episcopal church.

Solidarity in the church justice movement seemed to reach a new level.

"I think this is an opportunity for progressive groups in the church to speak out in support of the women religious who have supported us throughout the years," said David Pais, a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier.

Organizations like Voice of the Faithful, which emerged in response to the sex abuse crisis, see the LCWR issue as relevant to their own long-term goals.

"One of our aims is to bring about a restructuring of the church to prevent not only sexual abuse but systemic abuse that pervades the whole structure of the church. It's a medieval structure that has outlived its usefulness," said Daniel Marshall, a member of Voice of the Faithful and the Catholic Worker movement.

"They are denying the sisters a prophetic voice. It's very chilling," said Rita Houlihan, also of Voice of the Faithful and FutureChurch. "Any group with no capacity to self-examine is going to decay. They are in schism with the Gospel."

Joining the ranks of established church reform organizations were members of the newly formed Occupy Catholics, a group that is an exciting sign of new life for the church justice movement.

Inspired by Occupy Wall Street's phrase, "We the people have found our voice," Occupy Catholics is dedicated to challenging the institutional church to uphold its social justice teaching. More than half of the group is made

up of young-adult lay Catholics.

Nathan Schneider and other organizers from Occupy Catholics came to the cathedral to support the vigil.

"The people in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral are speaking as Catholics," said Schneider, a writer and activist in his late 20s. "It looks like a protest, but there is actually something deeper going on here. This is a part of the church acting as a part of the church."

Although the groups were united in a common hope that the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith would stop its investigation, some have differing hopes about the outcome of the LCWR's struggle with the Vatican.

"They will be creative in whatever they come up with. They're survivors," said Stephanie Samoy, a parishioner at St. Francis Xavier. "They are the women on the ground doing the work of the church. The point of this vigil is to let everyone know that we are here for them."

Those who have chosen to live their lives as Catholics outside of the institutional church are ready to welcome the sisters if they are forced out.

"I fervently hope that they do separate," said Linda Bocchino, a member of the Inclusive Community of Chattam, N.J., which is pastored by popular writer and speaker Anthony Padovano. "I don't think they require the hierarchy to do the good works that they're doing."

"The sisters have so much to give a church that is in deep distress right now," said Betsy Guarducci, also of the Inclusive Community. "We would support them as much as we could financially and spiritually."

If the church justice movement is a struggle for the soul of the church, the vigils were an opportunity to support and embolden the women whom reformers see as the heart of the church.

"This is a moment of grace and a moment of opportunity," Pais said.

Those standing outside of the doors of St. Patrick's have been wounded by the institutional church in different ways, but at the vigil they were unified in their pain.

"For the Vatican to come down on LCWR feels like they're coming down directly on Vatican II principles. And it hurts," Lorence said.

Perhaps what unites them even more than their shared sorrow is their shared love.

"What is most important to remember is that everyone is here because they love the church," Lorence said.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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