Blog



Delegates at the United Nations General Assembly Hall in New York before the April 25 opening of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (U.N. photo)



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***Editor's note**: Global Sisters Report's Monday Starter is a weekly feature from GSR staff writers that rounds up news from or about women religious that you may otherwise have missed.*

Monday Starter

"We Indigenous people were born to fight."

So said Brazilian activist Erileide Domingues in an interview during the first week of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which is being held April 25-May 6 at the U.N. headquarters in New York.

The Dominican Leadership Conference is hosting Domingues and other representatives from Brazil and other South American countries for the event, the 21st time this forum has been held and the first in-person gathering at the U.N. since 2019.

Adrian Dominican Sr. Durstyne "Dusty" Farnan, the Dominican U.N. representative, said hosting representatives from Brazil, where Indigenous persons are under constant threat by major agricultural interests, was almost self-evident.

"Wherever there is injustice, it's important for Dominicans to be present," she said. "Wherever people are suffering, we want to bring their stories to a place like the U.N. I think it's part of my DNA as a Dominican."

The stories are stark. For years, the Guarani-Kaiowás peoples in southern Brazil have been fighting efforts to displace them from their land in protracted disputes that tend to favor government-backed agricultural and mining interests.

"We are fighting for peace and freedom in our territory. I'm here to bring that voice to the United Nations," Domingues said in an interview with Global Sisters Report on April 26, the day before she was to address the forum.

Brazilian Indigenous activist Erileide Domingues, center, and Flávio Machado, left, a represen

Brazilian Indigenous activist Erileide Domingues, center, and Flávio Machado, left, a representative from Conselho Indigenista Missionário, are members of a delegation being hosted by the Dominican Leadership Conference and Sr. Adrian Dominican Sr. Durstyne "Dusty" Farnan, right, the Dominican U.N. representative. The representatives are in New York attending the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The three are seen here near the Dominican office, which is near the U.N.'s headquarters in New York City. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Of immediate concern to her people is being displaced by corporations involved in "land grabs" and using the land to grow soybeans for export and corn used for ethanol by Shell.

Activists say the government of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro backs the companies and seeks to open Indigenous lands for expanded commercial use. The Brazilian government's legal recognition of the Indigenous land rights would be a huge step in rectifying centuries of exclusion and oppression, Domingues said.

That is not likely to change while Bolsonaro is president, she said: He has taken a hard stance against Indigenous land protection.

"All we want is for our land to be recognized by the Brazilian government," she said.

Fortunately, the Guarani-Kaiowás have prominent allies, including the Missionary Indigenous Council, or Conselho Indigenista Missionário, known by the acronym CIMI, formed in 1972 by the Brazilian Catholic bishops to advocate for the country's Indigenous peoples.

Working with 180 Indigenous groups, CIMI advocates for "protection of Indigenous lands, self-determination for Indigenous peoples and environmental protections," said Flávio Machado, a representative from CIMI also attending the forum.

"The church is supporting this fight," he said.

Machado said the work of the council has been greatly strengthened by the support of Pope Francis, who has championed the cause of Indigenous rights, perhaps most prominently during the 2019 pan-Amazon synod.

"It's almost impossible to measure the importance of the pope's support," Machado said.

Domingues said the support of the church — both from CIMI and various sister congregations working "on the ground," including the Consolata Missionary Sisters and Franciscans — has been critical in activists' work.

"We feel they support us," she said. "They're on the ground with us, feeling what we feel."

Farnan said she is proud that the Dominicans can play a role — even a small one — during the U.N. event.

"If we can be an instrument to bring these stories forward, that's an honor," she said. "I have no choice but to help."

The delegation the Dominicans are hosting is made of eight people and also includes Cardinal Pedro Ricardo Barreto Jimeno of Peru, Bishop Rafael Cob García of Ecuador, and representatives of Caritas Spain and REPAM, a Pan-Amazonian church network.

As host, Farnan is also acting as the co-chair of the Amazon subcommittee of the NGO Mining Working Group, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations at the United Nations concerned about the dangers that extractive industries pose.

During the first day of the Indigenous forum, April 25, speakers at the U.N. said the growth of extractive industries is harming Indigenous people and their lands. Rarely do industries seek Indigenous consent, speakers said — a theme being examined during this year's session, UN News reported.

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Ursulines in Ohio start Nuns and Nones chapter

The Ursuline Sisters of Youngstown, Ohio, are joining the growing movement of Nuns and Nones, which unites millennial spiritual-seekers and Catholic sisters in conversation about faith and action.

"Nuns & Nones is an intergenerational, spiritual community dedicated to care, contemplation, and courageous action in service of life and liberation," the group

says on its website.

In a community news item in the Warren, Ohio-based Tribune Chronicle newspaper, Ursuline Sr. Kathleen McCarragher, one of the founders of the local group, said, " Research shows Nones feel they aren't part of any organized religion. We want to reach them with simple conversation and no judging."

Another founder, Ursuline Sr. Eileen Kernan, added, "We believe millennials are a spiritual group and willing to discuss their thoughts and experiences of God."

A meeting of the new chapter is planned for 7 p.m. May 2 at the Ursuline motherhouse in Canfield, Ohio.

There are more than a dozen chapters, or hubs, already established, according to the Nuns and Nones website.



Daughter of Charity Sr. Mary Bader (Courtesy of St. Ann's Center)

St. Ann's Center CEO offers Mother's Day affirmation

As the St. Ann's Center for Children, Youth and Families prepares to mark its 162nd anniversary, its current CEO, Daughter of Charity Sr. Mary Bader, has reflected on the meaning of Mother's Day, which is celebrated May 8 in the United States.

St. Ann's Center, formerly known as St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home and based in Hyattsville, Maryland, was founded by the Daughters of Charity in 1860 and is one of the oldest social service agencies in the Washington, D.C., area. It provides transitional housing and program support for mothers in need, many of them single mothers. In its early years, it assisted young women widowed during the U.S. Civil War.

"When I think of Mother's Day and what it means at St. Ann's, I tend to focus on the identity and self-worth that our mothers are forming as they grow into motherhood," Bader told GSR in an email. "When we first meet a young woman in our program, we try very hard to encourage and affirm the ways that they interact with their children. Even if it's something as small as the way they are holding or carrying their child."

Bader said the last two pandemic years have magnified ongoing needs and challenges for mothers.

"We are primarily focused on assisting young mothers facing housing instability — an issue which has really been magnified during COVID. As a society we have also begun to realize how difficult it is for single mothers to find adequate and affordable child care while they work to support their families," she said. "Through our transitional housing programs and on-site child care program, we are able to help ease those stressors."

To mark the group's anniversary, the annual Hope Blossoms gala, the first such in-person celebration since the pandemic began, will be May 11.

That event will honor winners of the Mary McGrory Advocacy Award, named for the Washington Post journalist who championed St. Ann's Center for more than 50 years, and the Michele Heidenberger Volunteer Award. That award is named for an American Airlines flight attendant and St. Ann's volunteer who was killed in the airline crash at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Honorees for the Mary McGrory Advocacy Award are Judy and John Ritz, Washington-area philanthropists. The late Steve Heidenberger, the brother-in-law of Michele Heidenberger and a St. Ann's board member who died in 2020, will receive the Michele Heidenberger Volunteer Award posthumously.