News

Christian activists demonstrate for a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war after an Ash Wednesday Mass near the White House in Washington, Feb. 14, 2024. (RNS/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

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Washington — February 15, 2024

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About 100 Christian protesters from several denominations praying for a cease-fire in Israel and Gaza gathered outside the White House on Ash Wednesday (Feb. 14) for a Catholic Mass and ecumenical Christian witness.

"The intention was to pray for our fellow Catholic, Joe Biden," said Judy Coode, communications director for the Catholic peace advocacy group Pax Christi USA, explaining the choice to hold a Catholic Mass during what was planned as an ecumenical event. "We pray for him and his conversion of heart."

The Rev. Joe Nangle, the 2023 winner of Pax Christi USA's teacher of peace award, celebrated the Catholic Mass on a folding table in Lafayette Park, instructing protesters in how to distribute ashes to each other. Catholics among the group also received Communion from Eucharistic ministers.

Catholics receive Communion during an Ash Wednesday Mass near the White House in Washington, Feb. 14, 2024. (RNS /Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

The Rev. Graylan Hagler, pastor emeritus of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Washington, marked protesters' hands with a cross of red liquid. He said that while the ashes "represent women and men and children that have been killed by bombs in Gaza," the red liquid represented "blood on our hands because we cannot exempt ourselves from what this country is doing," he said.

Hagler is an adviser to Fellowship of Reconciliation, a member of the coalition currently leading an eight-day peace pilgrimage from Philadelphia to Washington.

At least 28,576 people have been killed and 68,291 injured since Israel began a military campaign in Gaza after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Israel estimates that about 1,200 people were killed in Hamas' attack that day.

Philip Farah of the Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace told the protesters about an older cousin who survived the Israeli bombing of the Greek Orthodox St. Porphyrius Church in Gaza. Farah added that, later, as the woman tried to return to her home, she was shot in the leg and didn't survive.

"When an Israeli sniper shoots at an 84-year-old woman, you know what the message is. The message is that nobody is safe," he said. Later, he said, "An Israeli tank went over her body. We don't even know if she was still alive or dead."

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Jordan Denari Duffner, a member of the Catholic Advisory Council for Churches for Middle East Peace, told Religion News Service that her group hoped the Catholic Mass would reach President Biden, who has been "so committed to and public about" his faith.

She cited Pope Francis' repeated calls for cease-fire and a new poll from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a research company focused on American Muslims' issues, that showed that 71% of U.S. Catholics support a permanent cease-fire in Gaza.

The poll also found majority support for a cease-fire among Jewish and Muslim Democrats.

Josephine Guilbeau, a Catholic, said that, after 17 years in the U.S. military in addition to work in intelligence and cybersecurity, she was motivated to join the protest because she sees a genocide unfolding. "I'm here to take a stand and say this isn't good for our country," Guilbeau told RNS. "This isn't patriotism for our country."

After the Mass and ecumenical witness, 14 protesters attempted to risk arrest for about an hour, moving to different positions on the sidewalk outside the White House, without success.

Attendees pray during a cease-fire demonstration near the White House in Washington, Feb. 14, 2024. (RNS/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

Greer Hamilton, who was among those risking arrest, told RNS that they remained hopeful that their message would get through, even if the Secret Service declined to

detain them.

"This hope comes from the long, long history of Catholic peace activists taking direct action to urge and call for (an end to) war in the tradition of Gandhi and many, many others," Hamilton explained.

The coalition organizing the protest, which calls itself the Lenten Ceasefire Campaign, included Churches for Middle East Peace; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces; Dorothy Day Catholic Worker; Festival Center; Franciscan Action Network; Friends of Sabeel North America; Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd; National Council of Churches, USA; Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace; Pax Christi USA; Quixote Center; Sisters of Mercy of the Americas – Justice Team; Sojourners; United Church of Christ; and the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual.

The coalition's leaders said they anticipate more actions in Lent to push for a cease-fire, as well as their other calls to Biden and members of Congress supporting demilitarization instead of arming Israel, focusing on the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners in administrative detention, funding humanitarian assistance in Gaza and working to end the occupation of the Palestinian territories.