

# Culture war, not only ISIS, focus of St. Leo peace novena

**By Maria Wiering**

*mwiering@CatholicReview.org*

LITTLE ITALY - Eleven hours before President Barack Obama was expected to announce the authorization of air strikes in Syria to counter the Sunni militant group the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, a small group of Catholics sat down in St. Leo the Great Catholic Church in Baltimore to pray for world peace.

The violence in the Middle East, Gaza Strip or Ukraine was not the event's prime motivator, although it's now relevant, said St. Leo's pastor, Pallottine Father Salvatore C. Furnari.

Planning for the Novena for World Peace began last year, after a similar event in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a popular pilgrimage destination. Father Furnari served as a chaplain on the trip, organized by Patricia "Patsy" Soto, leader of the Las Vegas-based His Teachings Ministry.

With Father Furnari, 66-year-old Soto is leading the novena at St. Leo, which includes a series of traditional prayers such as the Stations of the Cross, rosary, Divine Mercy chaplet and psalms; eucharistic adoration; and Mass.

## **Prayer solution**

The novena, Sept. 10-20, begins most days at 9:30 a.m. in the church, with a break from 11:45 a.m.-1:45 p.m. It typically concludes after 3:30 p.m. Mass.

The novena - a nine-day devotion - attracted Dave and Toni Nealy, both 76, from their home near Indianapolis. They have participated in Soto's ministry for about 15 years, they said, and felt compelled to join her and Father Furnari in Baltimore for prayer.

"Prayer is the only thing that's going to solve anything," Toni said.

The novena's focus on world peace is "broader" than war or geopolitical conflicts, Dave said. The prayers ask God to bless families, marriage, priests and end abortion, addiction and sin, with a focus on personal and worldwide conversion with widespread return to prayer, fasting, sacrifice and the sacraments.

St. Leo's novena is extended to 11 days.

As for the novena overlapping with several dire situations around the world, Father Furnari said, "I don't think that's accidental."

He expects the novena to be "a source of blessing and grace" for the parish and its pilgrims.

"I did the same program at Medjugorje, (and) on a personal level I did receive many

blessings and grace,” he said. “As a result, I’d like to be able to have my parishioners derive and receive through these programs of prayer and devotion the same blessings, grace and peace from the Lord.”

### **‘We just talk’**

A mother of three, Soto fell away from the Catholic Church in her 30s after her husband divorced her. She sought Jesus, she said, in other Christian denominations before returning to the Catholic Church. With her conversion, she developed an ardor for prayer and the sacraments. She often prayed for the conversion of her children and husband.

“The more I prayed, the more I loved to pray,” she said. She asked Jesus to bring her husband and children to the church, and told him she would do whatever he wanted. In 1986, after confession and Mass, she heard whom she believes to be Jesus address her, calling her “little one.” He told her he was in every tabernacle in the world waiting for God’s children, she said.

In the three decades since, Soto has heard and seen Jesus several times a week, she said. He gives her messages about devotions and prayer, she said, that she relays publicly in writing. Some of these messages are woven into pre-recorded reflections on the Stations of the Cross and other devotions used in the novena.

“It’s audible,” Soto said of her visions. “When he’s talking with me, it’s like I’m talking to you. We just talk.”

### **‘Just the secretary’**

Soto has written two books: “For Love, With Love, Through Love” (Queenship Publishing Company, 2000) and “Jesus, I Quit: Stories of Patsy Soto and His Teachings Ministry” (self-published, 2004). She leads at least five novenas each year nationally and internationally, she said.

The His Teaching Ministry has no standing in the Diocese of Las Vegas, according to Father Robert E. Stoeckig, the diocese’s vicar general.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “private” revelations do not belong to the “deposit of the faith.”

“It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history,” it says.

The church has recognized some “private” revelations, including those of St. Hildegard of Bingen and St. Catherine of Siena.

Soto knows her experience sounds incredible, but she doesn’t listen to those who criticize her.

“It’s not about me. I’m just the secretary,” Soto said. “I’m nobody. I’m nothing. I’m just his instrument. I don’t expect anybody to believe. All I want is for all of us to return to Jesus.”

She hopes the current novena draws people to Jesus and prevents a satanic “black mass” planned in Oklahoma City Sept. 21.

Soto also hopes people begin making “the sacrifice to pray.”

“Jesus is so willing to make the changes” people want to see in the world, she said, “but we have to open ourselves up to prayer. ... We don’t realize what we can do with our love.”

*Also see:*

St. Leo’s celebrates Mother’s Day, first Communicants

Amicci’s: Friendly to customers and pocketbooks

Grazie, Little Italy revelers, for a great Sunday

St. Anthony festival offers fun options in Little Italy