

Nativity parishioner's lunch means rosary outside Catholic Center

Outside the Catholic Center in downtown Baltimore, across the street from the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jen Ayres has prayed the rosary on her lunch hour most weekdays beginning in late August.

Ayres, a parishioner of Church of the Nativity in Timonium who works downtown, realized on one of her many walks at lunchtime that she was close to the archdiocesan offices.

She attended Mass at the basilica on the feast of the Assumption Aug. 15, the day after the release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report detailing allegations of sexual abuse of more than 1,000 minors by more than 300 priests in six dioceses over the course of 70 years.

"The grand jury report out of Pennsylvania made me angry at our leadership - anger at what was going on and what was covered up for too long," she said.

She acknowledged that Archbishop William E. Lori was calling people to prayer, but noted that some people think prayer is not enough, or not effective.

"I felt it best that my prayer be directed toward the church's leadership," Ayres said in a mid-September interview after praying the rosary under an umbrella to ward off the light mist in the air.

She tries to honor her rosary practice every weekday, as her work schedule permits, and planned to do so through at least the end of September.

“When I started, I didn’t have a time frame,” she said, other than being very intentional in her prayer. She hopes that by the end of September, she’ll have some direction on what to do next.

Part of that may hinge on conversations she hopes to have with some priests she thinks are trustworthy.

Responses Ayres gets from passersby range from those who walk past and avert their eyes to others who lean in as she is praying and say, “thank you.”

“My meditation has brought me much closer to the Blessed Mother - as you might expect,” she said, noting that she has never prayed the rosary this consistently before.

She also focuses a lot on women in the Gospel and how important they were to the ministry of Jesus.

Ayres said it is hard at times to be a Catholic woman, and cited the woman who anoints Jesus with oil in Luke 7, and whom he pardons of her sins.

Immediately after that story, the next chapter of the Gospel notes that Jesus and the 12 Apostles were accompanied by certain women from Galilee: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna “and many others” as they went from town to town spreading the Good News of the kingdom.

“That’s when they started,” Ayres said. “They were there through the miracles and the Passion and the Resurrection. They ministered to Mary in those days.

“Women were the first witnesses to the Resurrection,” she said. “My reflection on that is giving me strength and pushing me to stand up as a Catholic woman.”

Ayres believes lay people want to be empowered in the church.

“We want to help,” she said. “We can’t just sit in the pews.”