

Seven Sisters Apostolate brings healing, peace through prayer

As the recent wave of the clergy sex abuse crisis continues to unfold, many laypeople are seeking ways to actively facilitate healing within the Church.

One ministry for women has found greater purpose amid the crisis doing just that. Started in 2011 by Janette Howe of St. Paul, Minnesota, the Seven Sisters Apostolate brings hope and healing to the Church as women commit to praying weekly Holy Hours for their pastor, priest, bishop or even Pope Francis. Together they “cover” hundreds of clergy in prayer every day of the year.

Around the country and the world, Howe said, women are responding, saying: “‘I can do something’ rather than call someone and speak about it and vent and maybe even move to gossiping about it. They’re saying, ‘this is what I can do to maybe reverse things or to heal.’”

Grace in numbers

As a member of the Seven Sisters, women make a yearlong commitment to pray for an hour either in adoration or before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle on a specific day of the week in groups of seven, thereby covering the entire week. Initially the apostolate was intended to serve pastors, but now some of the roughly 750 groups also are praying for other members of the clergy.

Currently more than 5,200 women are praying in 39 states and eight other countries. They range from teens to those in their 80s, and they come from all backgrounds.

Howe believes the Holy Spirit inspired her to form the apostolate specifically for women, adding that men can pray on their own or serve as substitutes.

Though women aren't called to be priests, Howe said, God entrusts them to "pray into this life, into this situation, into this call of something you're never going to be called to. I think it really causes us to lean into the guidance of the Holy Spirit: 'How do I pray for a priest?'"

There is no set format for prayer, though sisters are asked to pray for the priest or bishop's increased devotion to the Blessed Mother.

Deeper peace, love

Chris Heiderscheidt of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, said she responded to a call to pray for her pastor "because they are human beings, and the climate of the Church requires that they, more than anybody in the world, recognize and stand in love and not get distracted by what the devil is up to."

"He's a man, and we need to pray for his holiness, and that is not something I ever recognized before (joining Seven Sisters)," said Connie Mungia of Raymond, Nebraska. "When you have a holy priest, you have a holy Church."

Father Joseph Bergida, parochial vicar at St. Andrew the Apostle Church in Clifton, Virginia, and a Seven Sisters prayer recipient, said the prayer fortifies priests who need the graces for their ministry.

"I think as priests are seeking to be faithful to their vocation, they're coming under more attack from the enemy," Father Bergida said. "I think it also helps priests realize that their priesthood is appreciated by the faithful."

Father Bergida introduced his parish to the Seven Sisters Apostolate this past summer, just as another wave of the

clergy sex abuse scandal was breaking. He said parishioners have thanked him for giving them a way to respond.

And Father Bergida said he appreciates the daily prayers. “I notice this deeper sense of peace where certain things had been more difficult, or where I had been responding to them with a sense of burden – that’s been removed,” he said.

Fruit of prayer

Parishioners are noticing changes in their pastors as well. During the two years Estella Robles has been praying as a Seven Sister, she’s noticed her pastor has begun to delegate more. Prayer has made it easier to follow his lead, she said.

“We look more at the big picture and see how Father has brought us together.”

Christ’s real presence transforms women’s hearts as they hope their priest is benefiting from the prayers, Howe said. They’ve also found a healthy sense of unity with their priests.

“I think there’s a great discipline of call that the women are saying, ‘my prayer for one priest is making a difference,’” Howe said. “There’s a sense of strengthening in prayer.”

Susan Klemond writes from Minnesota.