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Championing women's rights

Local Catholics participate in annual U.N. commission on women

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NEW YORK CITY—The first two weeks of March found tens of thousands of women from around the world at the United Nations in New York City for the 53rd Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

Catholics from the Diocese of Charlotte were among those bringing the Catholic Church's hope-filled message of the dignity of women to the March 2-13 commission, which focused on the role of women as caretakers, specifically in the context of HIV and AIDS.

The CSW is a functional panel of the U.N. Economic and Social Council and is devoted solely to gender equality and the advancement of women.

Representatives of member states gather each year at the U.N. headquarters to assess progress on gender equality, set global standards and formulate tangible policies to promote gender equality and the advancement of women worldwide.

Jessica Rohaly, 20, a parishioner of St. Matthew Church in Charlotte and a sophomore at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, attended the commission — her second — with fellow students, faculty and members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who sponsor the college.

Rohaly helped to develop document language for the commission regarding the importance of education for girls.

Dr. Martha Shuping, a psychologist and parishioner of St. Leo the Great Church in Winston-Salem, held workshops with Concerned Women for America on the detrimental aftereffects of abortion on women's health.

Both women reported success in their missions.

For Rohaly, success was hearing the text developed by her group proposed during a presentation by a delegate from the United States.

“While I do not know whether our language will be used in the final document, the most exciting part of the conference was to hear our words used.” said Rohaly.

Speaking on the issue of the rights and dignity of women, Rohaly explained how girls in poor countries are often pulled from school to care for a family member afflicted with HIV and AIDS.

“The effects of the epidemic of AIDS often falls on women and girls,” she said. “Even if living with the disease themselves, they are often expected to perform extensive domestic duties along with caring for sick family members.”

Shuping found success in the workshops she provided for world leaders on the impact of abortion. A participant in various U.N. commissions since 2005, she specializes in psychological care of women and men after abortion.

Most recently, she co-authored a study in the Journal of Psychiatric Research indicating an increased incidence of a variety of mental health problems after abortion based on analysis of the national comorbidity survey.

Shuping shared some examples of attendees at her workshops who thanked her for her research, explaining how it will help them in their home countries where they are resisting pressure for normalizing or legalizing abortion.

“Pro-woman, pro-life nongovernmental organizations have a very important role to play, even if abortion is not the specific topic of the commission,” said Shuping.

“Because there is a constant pressure by the U.N. to make abortion a universal right, it is all the more important to educate on the issue during the CSW,” she said. “The CSW should look to a long range of women’s issues, not just the one issue addressed during a particular conference. Abortion is not a solution because it causes so much pain for women.”

“Why not educate the women of the world on the negative impact of abortion since so many are involved in promoting it,” she suggested. “Let’s let the nations know the consequences.”

Finding solutions

Though abortion was not the commission’s focus, Samantha Singson, director of Government Relations for Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, said “the United States delegation openly stated that ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’ would be a priority issue for the Obama administration.”

“Reproductive health” is a phrase commonly used to refer to access to abortion, contraceptives and sterilization.

Both Shuping and Rohaly spoke of the challenges of bringing forth Catholic Church teachings in a way that is acceptable to a secular or non-Catholic audience.

“If we try to evangelize the culture by saying, ‘the pope says,’ we don’t get too far,” said Shuping. “However, when you show the scientific data on how abortion hurts women, people are better able to understand.”

“We have to get wording into documents that are logical and moral without using religion,” said Rohaly. “It’s a back-door approach.”

The Vatican regularly sends delegations to the commissions. The late Pope John Paul II took a particular interest in the activities of the United Nations regarding the dignity of women.

On the occasion of the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, he wrote “Letter to Women,” wherein he extolled women’s dignity and perseverance despite unfavorable conditions throughout history.

“Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude,” wrote Pope John Paul.

“We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift Women will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future,” he wrote.

Rohaly said it was in studying Catholic Church documents and teachings such as “Letter to Women” throughout her high school years that propelled her to take up the challenge and come to the defense of women.

“I just couldn’t pass up the opportunity,” she said prior to the commission. “The ability to get my voice heard on this topic was very important to me.”

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