



Nurses rally outside the fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 12 in Baltimore, asking bishops to urge the Catholic hospital chain Ascension for better staffing and patient care. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Nurses rallied outside the fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 12 in Baltimore, urging bishops to do something about workers' pay and the level of care patients receive at the Catholic hospital chain Ascension.

"Our jobs require service, reverence, integrity, wisdom, creativity and dedication, all values that Ascension cites regularly in their ministry descriptions but all values that nurses see Ascension falls short on daily," said Kristine Kittelson, a registered nurse at Ascension Seton Medical Center in Austin, Texas.

In March, nurses from her Texas hospital were able to successfully [bargain](#) for a three-year contract that improved staffing and put into place a committee to improve patient care by listening to their concerns — among other concessions. Some of those nurses were present in Baltimore trying to help their counterparts at Baltimore's Ascension St. Agnes Hospital.

Ascension has faced such criticism from staff that have picketed all around the [country](#), all with the same complaints about staffing and patient care. The chain was the focus of a New York Times [investigation](#) in 2022 that said Ascension slashed staff before the pandemic even as it built up an \$18 billion cash reserve.

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"Bishops, please use your voices to call upon Ascension to do the right thing and bring a real respectable proposal to the bargaining table so that these caretakers can work in the safest and most well-staffed Catholic facility in this community," Kittelson said. "The nurses and community need your support."

It was hard to tell whether any bishops heard the group outside the hotel where their gathering was taking place, but other Catholics showed up to support them.

"It's a Catholic hospital and it should follow Catholic social teaching," said Maureen Daly, of the Maryland Catholic Labor Network. "You have friends in the church and nationwide and right here in Maryland ... when we see Catholic organizations betraying the principles of Catholic social teaching, we are scandalized. It gives scandal to the faithful."



Fr. Ty Hullinger, pastor of Transfiguration Catholic Community in Baltimore, stopped to pray and support for nurses rallying outside the fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Nov. 12 in Baltimore. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Fr. Ty Hullinger, pastor of Transfiguration Catholic Community in Baltimore, also stopped by to pray and show support for the nurses.

"What you are doing is powerful. It feels new. It's also unsettling in the best of all ways because you're shaking up what should have been shaken up a long time ago and what was tried a long time ago," Hullinger said. "Hold on to one another and the collective power and strength and unity you have. You are showing other workers across Baltimore in other hospitals, other care centers, all kinds of workplaces across Baltimore, that when workers come together to unite, they will win every time. Fight for your rights, for the rights of those you care for."



Nurse Lisa Watson, of Wichita, Kansas, joined rally outside the fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore on Nov. 12, asking bishops to urge Catholic hospital chain Ascension for better staffing and patient care at the local St. Agnes Ascension Hospital. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Lisa Watson, of Ascension St. Francis Hospital in Wichita, Kansas, said staffing at hospitals is at the heart of what's important in Catholicism: life. Yet it's what's greatly lacking, she said.

"Appropriate staffing is the difference between life and death," she said. "As a Catholic, I pray that the community, the bishops and the entire Catholic Church will join together and fight this Goliath with us. Our patients deserve better and our nurses deserve better."

The nurses' rally was the largest of the gatherings outside the US bishops' meeting this year, which in the past has seen large crowds gather to call out bishops on their handing of sexual abuse or fringe groups voicing disagreement with Pope Francis.



Robert Hoatson holds a sign aimed at U.S. bishops, Nov. 13 outside the Baltimore hotel where the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops gathered for its annual fall meeting. Hoatson was representing Road to Recovery, an organization that helps victims and survivors of clergy sex abuse. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

This year, Robert Hoatson, of the group Road to Recovery, was the sole protester of clergy sexual abuse. Sitting in a lawn chair outside the meeting hotel of the bishops' conference, he held a bright pink sign directed at bishops that said: "Join Welby & Resign," referring to the archbishop of Canterbury who resigned Nov. 12 following allegations that he covered up abuse.

"A courageous man in Great Britain yesterday, a clergyman, of the hierarchy, he resigned, appropriately," he told National Catholic Reporter Nov. 13.

"It's what our bishops should have done decades ago," he said, after the discovery of decades of cover-ups.

Hoatson said he didn't think the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which the bishops instituted in 2002 to deal with abuse cases, was of consequence.

"All of the stuff that the church has done is cosmetic," he said. "All of these committees, they haven't done anything yet, if you notice. They keep saying, 'Well, we are vetting all the people who work in parishes and vetting all the people.' That's not who we have to vet. We have to vet the guys that covered up the priests and the other personnel, because we're not going to get anywhere."

Bishop Joseph Strickland, formerly of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, and removed from his post by Pope Francis a year ago after an investigation into his governance, also made an appearance Nov. 13 along with a group of supporters.

Strickland, a fierce critic of Pope Francis, said that while some of the bishops at the meeting were men of substance, he tagged them as "silent shepherds" and said church forces "have attempted to silence me."

This story has been updated with reporting about other appearances outside the US bishops' meeting on Nov. 13.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series](#).