News



Participants in a protest display signs outside the grounds of La Reina, a high school and middle school run by the Sisters of Notre Dame in Thousand Oaks, California. The protest was organized by the group Save La Reina to prevent the closure of La Reina. (Tom Hoffarth)

by Tom Hoffarth

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A Jan. 24 announcement that the Sisters of Notre Dame plan to close a high-performing all-girls Catholic school in Thousand Oaks, California, by the end of June after nearly 60 years of operation has generated an impassioned pushback by students, parents and alumnae.

Amid the swift scrambling, there is also plenty of soul searching.

La Reina, a high school and middle school, boasting a 100% graduation rate into four-year colleges, has been unable to reverse what are national trends: declining enrollment and projected budget deficits.

A 53% drop in enrollment over the prior eight years and a deficit of $1.4 million for fiscal year 2023 were the two driving reasons for the decision, according to an email sent to parents by then-president Tony Guevara, who recently stepped down from his position.

It was supported by the National Ministry Corporation, the corporate entity of the Sisters of Notre Dame. It also came endorsed by the La Reina school board. But the board underwent an overhaul in the weeks prior to the announcement — seven of the nine directors resigned or were asked to leave, and replaced with those tied to the Sisters of Notre Dame. Those who left signed nondisclosure agreements.

The board said current enrollment is 268, of which 149 are in high school. As recent as 2019, enrollment was 352. The average tuition for students is about $20,000 a year.

A Save La Reina group was activated within hours of the announcement by an alumnae base that includes many employed in the legal and business world. It included the launch of a website and Facebook page for news updates, and starting a pledge drive to show its potential financial support. The group also staged a vocal protest outside the school grounds on Feb. 3 in concert with the school's hosting of an annual "Nun Run" fundraising event, where proceeds support the Sisters of Notre Dame Life & Ministry Fund.



Protest participants display signs outside the grounds of La Reina Feb. 3 in Thousand Oaks, California. The protest was organized by the Save La Reina group to prevent the closure of La Reina, a high school and middle school run by the Sisters of Notre Dame. (Tom Hoffarth)

La Reina's high school, selected as a 2013 National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education, is rated No. 35 among the more than 1,100 Catholic high schools in the country and No. 12 among 108 Catholic high schools in California in a survey by online education resource provider Niche.com.

It has been named the Ventura County Star's Best Private School in Ventura County for three years in a row.

The closing of a Catholic school may not be breaking news, but aggressive activation of a grassroots movement that includes some Southern California star power has amplified the message.

Mira Sorvino, the Academy Award-winning actress whose youngest daughter, 11-year-old Lucia, started at La Reina middle school in the fall of 2023, has been letter-writing and strategizing on the group's behalf.

"We were stunned because when we came last summer to visit, she fell in love with it, we applied, we were accepted, but we were never given any indication there was a possibility they had financial problems or would consider closing," Sorvino told NCR. "I was ecstatic about finding this school. It has been a gem. But to have this bomb drop at the end of January has left the girls crying for days. They're still not over it."

Sorvino, who last Easter converted to Catholicism through the RCIA program at Our Lady of Malibu Catholic Church, said her daughter travels 35 minutes each way to the school from their Malibu home.

In a letter of support sent to the Notre Dame leadership as well as Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Sorvino explained: "[My daughter] has fallen in love with her new teachers and friends. There is a special spirit of calm love, academic excellence and spiritual growth that permeates this campus, thanks to the Sisters' influence. This is more than just a brick-and-mortar, dollars-and-cents educational business. It is a ministry. The school is rightfully named after the Queen of Heaven and I think we can pray for inspiration and guidance to not shutter this."

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The Sisters of Notre Dame started La Reina School in 1964 to serve the growing Conejo Valley west of Los Angeles.

Sr. Margaret Mary Gorman, the provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame USA province, points to data showing population declines in Ventura County because of the high cost of living. She said residents moving out of state have led to La Reina suspending many extracurricular opportunities.

"That affects the total school experience," she told NCR. "It's what families have come to expect and the sisters want for our schools, but that's increasingly difficult to provide. It's not a problem unique to our California province."

Asked about how this decision may influence the other 12 Sisters of Notre Dame ministries across the country, Gorman added: "Each of our schools is its own entity and board. There's no grand master plan to pull out of our schools. … This is a reflection of the larger context of what is happening in the church and in the United States."

Laura Koehl, the executive director of the Sisters of Notre Dame USA National Sponsorship and Network Office as well as COO of the National Ministry Corporation Board, told NCR: "There are a lot of people in various stages of grief about this. We see the reaction and where it's coming from and we need to stay focused on what's in the best interest of the students, their families and the faculty."

Laird Wilson, who has two daughters as La Reina graduates and retired in 2021 after 14 years as the director of facilities and operation, said supporters have raised more than $7 million over the years for capital and leasehold improvements. He said La Reina had been paying as much as $120,000 a year to the sisters to rent the facilities as well as funding the dean of admission position on campus.

"The campus looks and operates almost like a college campus because we have been willing to make that happen," said Wilson. "The reality is if you take La Reina out of here, you have closed so much Catholic education in the Canejo Valley."



A sign addressing the announced closure of the all-girls Catholic school La Reina is pictured Feb. 3 in Thousand Oaks, California. A Jan. 24 announcement that the Sisters of Notre Dame plan to close the school by the end of June after nearly 60 years of operation has generated an impassioned pushback by students, parents and alumnae. (Tom Hoffarth)

Neither former school president Guevara or principal Maggie Marschner responded to an NCR interview request. Guevara resigned on Feb. 5 citing medical issues. Marschner has taken a leave of absence.

Guevara is featured on the school's website endorsing a 2019-2024 strategic plan called "Her Future Our Focus," in which he is quoted:

> La Reina has the opportunity to re-evaluate, refocus, and reinvigorate its programs, ensuring that our school remains a leader in educating young women, for generations to come. Given the pace of change in today's world, it is imperative that we understand our evolving landscape,

> anticipate our future, and think boldly about how La Reina will continue to provide a transformative educational experience for our students. With much significant growth underway, I look forward to offering regular updates on our progress.

Gorman said that, despite speculation, there is no plan to sell any or all of the 34-acre property — 11 acres are dedicated to the school campus, while six acres continue to support an active Sisters of Notre Dame convent and education center, and 17 acres are undeveloped.

More than 350 virtual signatures were sent on a petition to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, asking Archbishop José Gomez to help find a solution. Paul Escala, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles superintendent of schools, said in a statement to NCR: "While La Reina Middle School and High School resides within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the school is owned and operated by the Sisters of Notre Dame and managed independently from the Archdiocese by its Board of Directors. The Archdiocese has no oversight of the school.

"That said, the Archdiocese is committed to assisting the students and staff, in partnership with school leadership, with their transition to other Catholic schools. We encourage all concerned stakeholders to share their sentiments with the provincial office and the school's board of directors. Our prayers are with you and the La Reina school community."

There are more than 50 high schools in the archdiocese's Department of Catholic Schools, the largest system of non-public schools in the nation, covering Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, and serving more than 68,000 students.

"I think the Archdiocese can be a hero here to help mediate," said Sandhya Kogge, a 1999 graduate helping to drive the Save La Reina group. "The message to the diocesan community may be to stay out of our business, but educating young women in the Catholic faith is their business."

Kogge, a film distribution lawyer at The Walt Disney Company and former federal prosecutor who is on the board of directors of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, said while the Save La Reina group has recruited the law firms of Ervin Cohen & Jessup as well as Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani LLP to help map out a legal strategy, filing a lawsuit is not a goal.

"But if the National Ministry Corporation will not entertain options to keep the school open, then students and parents and donors need to seek claim and damages," said Kogge.

Save La Reina has proposed delaying the closure at least one more school year, while continuing to assess financial support that could potentially come forward.

Gorman told NCR the decision to announce a closing date now is based on a concern that "if we waited, the school might collapse during the course of that extra year and that's not good for anyone. If this happened too suddenly, there would be no time for the school community to spend time savoring the tradition and history and having a better closure. That's just not the way we would ever want for a school to close."

Kogge emphasized the alumnae group is "not acting out of nostalgia or volunteering their time out of a need to be saviors. We are doing it for the girls, the students at the school, and for a community that has shaped who we are."