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Sisters and guests dance to celebrate Easter at the Benedictine Sisters of Erie monastery in Erie, Pa. (Courtesy of the Erie Benedictines)



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The Benedictine Sisters of Erie were minding their own business, getting ready for their Community Weekend, when they were to be joined at the monastery by dozens of oblates.

Then a conservative activist told his nearly 60,000 followers on X, formerly known as Twitter, that the nuns are committing voter fraud. With 2.7 million views since it was posted Oct. 22, the congregation's leaders have since been busy giving interviews to The Washington Post, CNN and news outlets around the world, as well as consulting with their attorney on possible legal action.

The post, by Cliff Maloney, the founder of a group called Pennsylvania Chase that knocks on doors to make sure Republicans in Pennsylvania return mail-in ballots, says one of its workers went to the monastery and found that voter registration rolls list 53 voters at the address.

"BREAKING: a member of the PA CHASE discovered an address in Erie, PA today where 53 voters are registered. Turns out it's the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and NO ONE lives there," the post says. It includes a video of a list of sisters' names and ages, and also lists "affinity" for each one, designating them as conservative or liberal, then goes on to say "Our attorney's are reviewing this right now. We will not let the Dems count on illegal votes."

The 55 nuns who live in the monastery beg to differ.

"Nobody has come here," Sr. Linda Romey, the congregation's spokesperson, told Global Sisters Report. "There is not a single sister who would say no one lives here. Not a single guest would say that. I don't know where this person was, but it wasn't 6101 East Lake Road."

Romey said the Rule of Benedict requires them to welcome guests as if they are Christ.

"If either Cliff or his canvassers show up, that's exactly what we'll do," she said. "If they don't want to pray with us, they can at least have a meal with us."

In an Oct. 23 press release, the sisters fired back.



Worshippers process into the chapel at the Mount St. Benedict Monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy of the Erie Benedictines)

"The Benedictine Sisters take no issue with knocking on doors to increase citizen participation in elections. We do take issue with claiming false information as true in an effort to discredit differing views or affiliations," the statement says.

"We want to call Cliff Maloney to account for his blatantly false post that accuses our sisters of fraud. We do live at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery and a simple web search would alert him to our active presence in a number of ministries in Erie," said prioress Sr. Stephanie Schmidt in the statement. "We also want to alert those who subscribe to X and other social media platforms to be vigilant and seek additional information before accepting these posts as truth."

The press release says it is important that the sisters defend themselves, but also that they defend the democratic process from misinformation.

"We want to be on public record as having called out this fraud so that if the outcome of next month's election is contested in Pennsylvania our integrity will not be called into question," it says. "We are also pursuing legal counsel regarding this public defamation."

Maloney, meanwhile, has doubled down on his allegations, writing on X: "Now the commies are coming in claiming that 'nuns live there' or 'you idiot just google it.' WRONG." His profile on X says "I crush commies to make liberty win."

Apparently responding to the press release, Maloney wrote on X: "I appreciate the public reply from the church claiming that their members are legal voters. Once we have proof, we will be content."



The Mount St. Benedict Monastery is home of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in Erie, Pennsylvania (Courtesy of the Erie Benedictines)

Romey said those making false allegations should have the burden of proof.

"They didn't even ask a simple question, make one phone call, or look at our website," she said. "They made no effort, they just immediately put out false information."

Maloney claimed on X that his worker entered the monastery and asked if it was a retirement home, since there were so many people registered to vote there. He said he was told no one lived there, but from time to time people might stay there a night or two on their way to their missions.

Romey told Global Sisters Report the reception desk has sisters working there from morning to night and nobody has been to the monastery asking about voter registrations.

Romey said she is not comfortable with someone posting sisters' names, ages and addresses on social media, which she called an invasion of privacy, let alone their

supposed political affinity.

"That was really obnoxious," Romey said, noting it is not known where information marking them liberal or conservative would have even come from. "It's a puzzle to me."

Romey stressed that the congregation is non-partisan and doesn't get involved in political activities or campaigns. Each sister is urged to vote according to her own conscience. One member, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, on Oct. 17 hosted a conversation with former Republican Rep. Liz Cheney where the two talked about common ground amidst the nation's political divide, an event that drew 4,000 people to the Erie convention center.

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While Maloney's posts on X sparked thousands of comments from each side blasting the other, Romey said the congregation has gotten only support: "Some funny, some grateful, some donations."

She said there has been no blowback on social media or harassment.

"As far as I know, there have been no phone calls, and the emails I've gotten have been 'Add me to your list' or support emails," Romey said. "I think it's because the nature of this post was just so ridiculous. It's ludicrous to say no one lives here."

One message of support was wholly unexpected: Romey said the Pennsylvania Secretary of State's office reached out to thank the sisters for confronting untruths, because it makes their work defending the integrity of the election easier.

Unfortunately, she said, some people now think political discourse is just who can shout the loudest.

"They think if they repeat it loud enough and often enough, it will magically come true," Romey said. "We're not going to take that bait."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
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