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Church's teachings call for political involvement

Add Nick Riola to the list of Catholics who have found their faith has something to say about political activism.

The Holy Rosary parishioner's discovery came after he contacted Rochester city and police officials about halting the drug activities at a house on his street.

"I spent well over two and a half months trying to get rid of the drug house," he said. "I wound up having to get ahold of the landlord to get them evicted."

Despite his success, Riola was frustrated that he'd been unable to get public officials to take speedy action. He mentioned that frustration to his pastor, Father Lawrence Murphy. Father Murphy invited him to be part of a newly forming committee — a local organizing committee — being developed through the Rochester parish's involvement with Interfaith Action, a federation of congregations dedicated to community activism.

The committee members, working with neighborhood residents, organized "public actions" in April and June at which hundreds of neighborhood residents shared their concerns with police officials. The committee also developed a plan for a community policing program calling for increased police presence in the neighborhood, which the police have begun to implement.

"It's been a big difference," Riola said. "The overall response from people in the neighborhood has been positive."

Riola acknowledged that the idea of church involvement in the political realm was new to him.

"You didn't associate the church with this kind of activity," he said of the Catholic Church of his youth.

But Riola is now convinced that "the church should not be just a sanctuary you go to once a week and feel good."

Speaking out

In recent years in the United States, it has almost become a given that the Catholic Church has not been "just a sanctuary." Catholics — from the bishops to the people in the pews — have been taking their faith into the political arena, and sometimes into the streets.

In this diocese alone, for example, Catholics have been involved in recent political battles over such issues as welfare reform, an abortion clinic, a strip club, a garbage transfer station and drug houses.

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STORY BY LEE STRONG • PHOTOS FROM CNS