

Thousands Attend Mass Prayer to 'Defend Faith'

By [Ken Martinez](#)

April 22, 2012



Thousands of believers attending a prayer service at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in central Moscow on Sunday. **Vladimir Filonov**

More than 65,000 people gathered at Christ the Savior Cathedral on Sunday for a mass prayer service and procession that was large enough to even rival the mass opposition protests this winter.

Russian Orthodox leaders called for nationwide prayers Sunday to “defend the faith” amid what they see as a spate of attacks, including over their harsh stance on female punk rockers’ political performance in the cathedral in February, the church’s close ties to the state and the ostentatious lifestyles of some priests.

The church says it has seen an increase in the desecration and vandalism of religious relics since the Pussy Riot band protested Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin.

Priests carrying relics damaged in various attacks followed Patriarch Kirill in a procession around the cathedral. One priest carried a cross slashed by a vandal with a knife at a church in Nevinnomyssk, in the Stavropol region, in March, while another had an icon from Veliky Ustyug riddled with bullet holes in the 1920s.

“I vow to never restore these icons under any circumstances,” Kirill said.

“Let the marks inflicted on them constantly remind us of the unseen warfare that every Christian should lead, above all with themselves and with their sins,” he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Thousands of people pressed close to Christ the Savior Cathedral to watch church leaders on two large television screens. Some people held banners or waved flags, while many covered their heads with newspapers or umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun. With the temperature peaking at 21 degrees Celsius, several people required medical attention after fainting from standing for long periods in direct sunlight, news reports said.

A Moscow Times reporter saw police confiscating water bottles from people as they passed through metal detectors surrounding the cordoned-off area around the church.

The church said more than 50,000 people attended, roughly the same number of people who gathered in December for the first of a series of mass protests over disputed election results. Police later pushed attendance numbers up to 65,000, RIA-Novosti reported.

Large numbers of people were bussed in from neighboring regions.

“We came from the Leningrad region in 15 buses,” one believer told Gazeta.ru. Another group from Nizhny Novgorod included 1100 people.

Smaller prayer services were held in 17 other dioceses around the country.

Outside the Moscow venue Sunday, a woman staged a one-person picket to support the detained three Pussy Riot members, RIA-Novosti said. The demonstrator held three balloons, each with the name of one of the three young women in custody. At a hearing Thursday, the women were denied bail and ordered to remain in jail at least until June. They face up to seven years in jail if convicted on charges of hooliganism.

Russian Orthodox leaders say the women must be punished — a call that has resulted in additional criticism of the church.

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