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Catholics gather for annual Call To Action pilgrimage

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 7, 2008

Mix of young and old listening to Kathleen Kennedy Townsend at the opening CTA plenary session. (Photo Tom Fox)

Milwaukee -- Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, author and Democratic politician, spoke before some 2,500 progressive-minded Catholics, giving the opening address at the annual national Call To Action conference here Nov. 7-9, telling them to keep the faith -- and to keep it in politics.

She offered a hope-filled analysis of the political scene today, making the point that if change can happen in U.S. society, it can also happen in the Catholic church.

In tune with her audience, freshly optimistic in the wake of the election of Sen. Barack Obama three days earlier, she said that what sometimes seems to be the impossible becomes possible over time.

She imagined, much to the satisfaction of her audience, that women one day will be bishops in the Catholic church and one day one of them will even be pope.

The election of the first African-American president was not completely unforeseen, she said, adding that her father, Robert F. Kennedy, when he campaigned for president in 1968 predicted that an African-American would be elected president 40 years later.

What he predicted is now a page in U.S. history.

Kennedy Townsend called the Obama election a direct rebuke to the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. She noted that 54 percent of the Catholic vote went for Obama, despite well publicized pleas by a number of outspoken bishops to cast their ballots for Sen. John McCain, lest Catholics commit grave sin. She noted that these public utterances were never criticized by other bishops.

?It was a wonderful rebuke of the hierarchy,? she said of the election, adding the vote represented a 15 percent pendulum swing, away from a Catholic majority vote for Bush in 2004.

She noted with clear delight that despite the fact that Scranton, Pa., Bishop Joseph F. Martino condemed the Obama ticket, 65 percent of the Catholics in the county in which includes Scranton voted for Obama.

This latest rebuke of the U.S. hierarchy and its discrediting in the wake of the Catholic sex abuse cover-up, she said, has placed Catholic lay leaders in the forefront of a changing church.

She praised lay leaders, such as Patrick Whelan, president of Catholic Democrats, and Alexia Kelley, a principal founder of Catholics in the Alliance for the Common Good, saying they represent part of a fresh future for the church.

?What is happening now,? she said, ?is that Catholics are saying, ?We are going to take our church back.??

For years, the Catholic hierarchy, including the Vatican, she said, aligned itself with the Republican Party, focusing on three issues: abortion, same-sex marriages, and stem-cell research. Now, she said, the Vatican, recognizing a major shift in power in the U.S. political scene, is quickly warming up to the new president-elect, Obama.

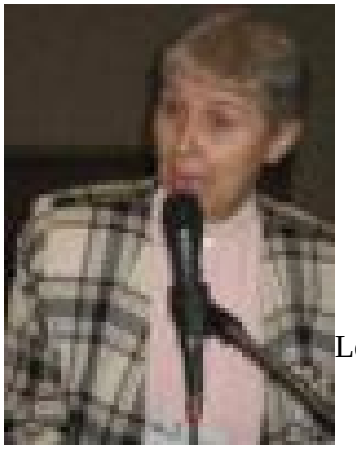
?They can change ?- and they can change quickly,? she said, referring to Vatican officials, making the point that change can happen within the Catholic church as well.

Kennedy Townsend said she was pleased to see that the Democratic Party is reaching out more to religious-minded people and that religious-minded people are feeling at home in the Democratic Party.

She said she sees this as a major sign of hope that Catholic social teachings can be advanced in the coming years. ?Every successful social movement,? she said, has had religious undercurrents.

The theme of the conference was ?Our Earth, Our Church, Ourselves."

Early arrivals Friday participated in seminars that focused on new ways to look at earth and community. Seminars also gathered participants to discuss gay and lesbian person ministry programs and strategies for living and ministering within a ?post-clerical? church.?


Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick in a Friday seminar recounted the slow and painful progress gay and lesbian persons are making within the Catholic church. She described the various documents issued by the church hierarchy during the past 30 years, saying that supportive documents have helped form a more compassionate church and negative documents have often led to reactions that raised issues and eventually set a context for further gains.

?Good things can emerge when bad things happen,? the typically patient Gramick stated.

Gramick said she recognized there had been setbacks in recent years, especially in statements coming out of the hierarchy. At the same time, she said, Catholics in the pews are becoming more accepting and more open to gay and lesbian persons. ?Our hierarchy is getting regressive. But on a grass-roots level it is the opposite that is happening,? she said. ?Catholics in general are getting more expansive, more embracive, more accepting.?

She said she expects the day will come when official church teachings allow for gay and lesbian couples to live intimate, morally sanctioned lives.

Official church teachings now hold that sexual intimacies between persons of the same sex are immoral. This teaching, she said, comes from old natural law theology, which, she said, has not kept up with contemporary insights into the fullness of the natural law, as understood, for example, by modern experience and modern science. She pointed out, as an example, that in all mammal species a segment of the population is attracted to the same sex. ?It is common through all nature,? she said.

Gramick has been engaged in pastoral work with lesbian and gay persons since 1971 and received Call To Action?s leadership award in 2001.

In a seminar lead by Mary E. Hunt titled ?Living in a Post-Clerical Church,? she invited participants to think about a church in which ministries are based ?on the needs of the world? and not ?needs of the church.?

?We have to prepare ourselves for very different ministries,? she said, noting that there are now approximately 27,000 priests and some 31,000 lay ecclesial ministers, most of them women. She said the average age of a U.S. priest today is 70 years.

She said that Catholics need to look at other denominations for examples as they go forward in preparing the church for new ministries. ?We have to prepare ourselves for very different ministries,? she said to a gathering of several hundred participants. ?We are at the end of an era.?

She pointed to four challenges facing the ministers of the future.

The first, she said, is gaining education and training at a time when the church blocks women from many education avenues.

The second, she said, is finding adequate compensation. She said in the future people need to be paid for work done and not simply for the clerical titles they hold.

Third, she said, is accountability -- being accountable to the community the minister serves and not the hierarchy that has put the person in place.

The fourth, she said, is liability. In ministry work, one?s liability needs to be covered. She said that mechanisms will develop that allow for this need to be met.

She said the common thread in ministry is working for justice. Hunt?s overall theme is that the ?post-clerical? church is already upon us, even though much of the hierarchy is living in denial regrarding this fact. It is living in denial because to affirm it would be to affirm the role that women have played and are increasingly playing in the Catholic church today.

Some of the other highlights from the weekend included:
?tDr. Robert Bullard, the father of the movement to counter environmental racism talked about how he got involved as a sociologist in how poor minority neighborhoods throughout the United States bear the brunt of environmental degradation. He talked about his desire to build young leadership among his students in order to continue to encourage sociologists, attorneys and public policy-makers to continue to look at how neighborhoods of color tend to bear the brunt of freeways, landfills, and the disposal of waste.

?Young adults gathered for pizza and an intimate conversation with a special guest, retired Bishop Remi de Roo of the diocese of Victoria, Canada. The bishop is one of the few living Vatican Council Fathers to have participated in all four sessions. He spends much of his time lecturing and talking to people about the vision of Vatican II. In this setting, many of the young adults in attendance were able to hear about how de Roo was installed just in time to participate in Vatican II, and how much this experience fit in with the way he wished to minister with people. Many of the young adults were able to ask him challenging questions about the church?s position on the role of women in the church, as well as the treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. He expressed how excited he was to see the future of the church in the young who were gathered.

?On the final morning, Sr. Dorothy Stang was posthumously awarded the 2008 Leadership Award. Sr. Stang, who ministered with peasant farmers in Brazil, was shot and killed in 2005 while defending the farmers and environment from landowners and the logging industry. Her brother, David, was present to accept the award. He assured the audience that they didn?t bury her but they planted her, and that her spirit is bringing forth an increase in Catholics standing up for justice.

?Finally, de Roo addressed the assembly about the how the spirit of Vatican II lives on strong at a conference such as Call To Action. He pointed out that the 50th anniversary of Pope John XXIII?s call for the Council will be Jan. 25, 2009. He said over the last 50 years many have fallen asleep to the spirit of the council, but there are pockets that still deeply remember the impact it had in inspiring efforts to return to the original sources of the church, as well as in updating the church. He assured the audience that the principles of Vatican II still apply today, such as how *Lumen Gentium*, a council document, tells us that the laity have the duty to speak up on concerns about the common good of the church.

The gathering also saluted Dan and Sheila Daley who recently stepped down as codirectors of the Call To Action movement after 30 years of leadership.

(To read a profile of the Daley?s click here.) [1].

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