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Spirituality



Brian Flanagan presents "Dialogue in a Humbled Church," the 2019 Msgr. Philip J. Murnion Lecture, at a March 29 event sponsored by the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. (Courtesy of Catholic Theological Union/Mark Campbell)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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To counteract polarization in the church and the country, the Catholic Church needs to approach both with humility — which is also an appropriate response to its mishandling of clerical sex abuse, said theologian Brian Flanagan.

"We were not humble, and now we have been humbled — humiliated, even, which comes from the same word — by what we have done and failed to do," said Flanagan, associate professor of theology at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia.

Lack of humility was a "contributing factor" to the twin crises of sexual abuse and cover-up, Flanagan said. So was "a false theology of the church unable to name ecclesial limitation and ecclesial sin," which instead saw "ecclesial holiness as perfection."

But by reclaiming humility as a virtue for the institution as a whole — rather than only for individuals — the church could offer a powerful model of Christ's humility, through truth-telling that acknowledges both the church's holiness and its sinfulness, he said.

Such truth-telling "says that we are not God and do not have all the answers, but that we also have a story to tell and a truth to share about who we are and what God has done for us and for our world," he said.

Flanagan's talk "Dialogue in a Humbled Church," was this year's Msgr. Philip J. Murnion Lecture at a March 29 Catholic Common Ground Initiative event, sponsored by the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Murnion and Bernardin founded the initiative in 1996.

The kind of dialogue practiced by the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, Flanagan said, is a necessary and "key practice" and "key habit" of the humility he calls for in his recent book, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church*.

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"Only a humble church can enter into dialogue, not as a superior, but as a dialogue partner," he said, noting that the church should be open to learning from the world about things such as human rights, sexuality and religious liberty.

This comes with the caveat that sometimes humility has been misinterpreted and misused to encourage the powerless to accept their lot, Flanagan said.

"Encouraging that kind of humility is precisely the sort of thing that keeps lay people in their place, paying, praying and obeying, keeps clergy quiet in the face of mismanagement or injustice, keeps abuse victims silent or told to 'offer it up,' " he said.

Instead, he proposed a "vision of humility as a form of Christ-like power," that would include a church that is small, poor and even weak.

Smallness would not necessarily refer to numbers, as in a "holy remnant" or "Benedict option," Flanagan said, but rather the idea of "becoming like little children" or like a God who speak in the "still, small whisper."

A humble church would not just be — and be for — the materially poor, but also embrace "the greater poverty of spirit that also might be called for: a church that has nothing of its own and that relies upon God for its life, for its identity, for its existence."

Looking to the example of Jesus, "who fought against the powers of the world with his words and with his self-giving rather than with an army of angels," the church could model weakness, "in comparison to the ideals of power that we find in our world," he said.

A "self-emptying church" would be one that "empties itself in fidelity to its mission but holds nothing back for its own security except its trust in God," he said.



John Carr, second from left, receives the Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Award from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative (Courtesy of Catholic Theological Union/Mark Campbell)

As a metaphor for humility, Flanagan offered theologian Peter Phan's model of the church as "migrant people of God" — or even the "refugee people of God" — that "points to the church's utter lack of safety, utter lack of security outside of the care of God."

Although he stressed that the church must acknowledge both its holiness and its sinfulness, too often, especially in the past two centuries, the church has shied away from recognizing ecclesial sin and has denied the church's humanity.

Humility will require "confessions, repentance, lament and reparation" of the church's sins and honesty about the church's past. "No dialogue succeeds without truth-telling," Flanagan said.

Modeling such truth-telling and humility was the recipient of this year's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Award from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, John Carr, director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University.

In presenting the award, Common Ground chair Fr. Michael Place called Carr "a true north Catholic."

Carr, who formerly worked for the U.S. bishops' conference, said Cardinal Bernardin taught him how "to bring people in, instead of pushing them away."

Bernardin was an "engage and persuade kind of leader," Carr said, as is Pope Francis.

"If you think we've lost the culture, then you hunker down. You try to preserve and protect. You judge and you condone," he said. "If you think you have, in Catholic social teaching and in the Gospel, what we need, then you engage and persuade."

Carr, who recently went public with his own abuse by a priest when he younger, remains hopeful even in this "disorientating and even demoralizing time."

"Even in tough times, we are more than our failures," he said.

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