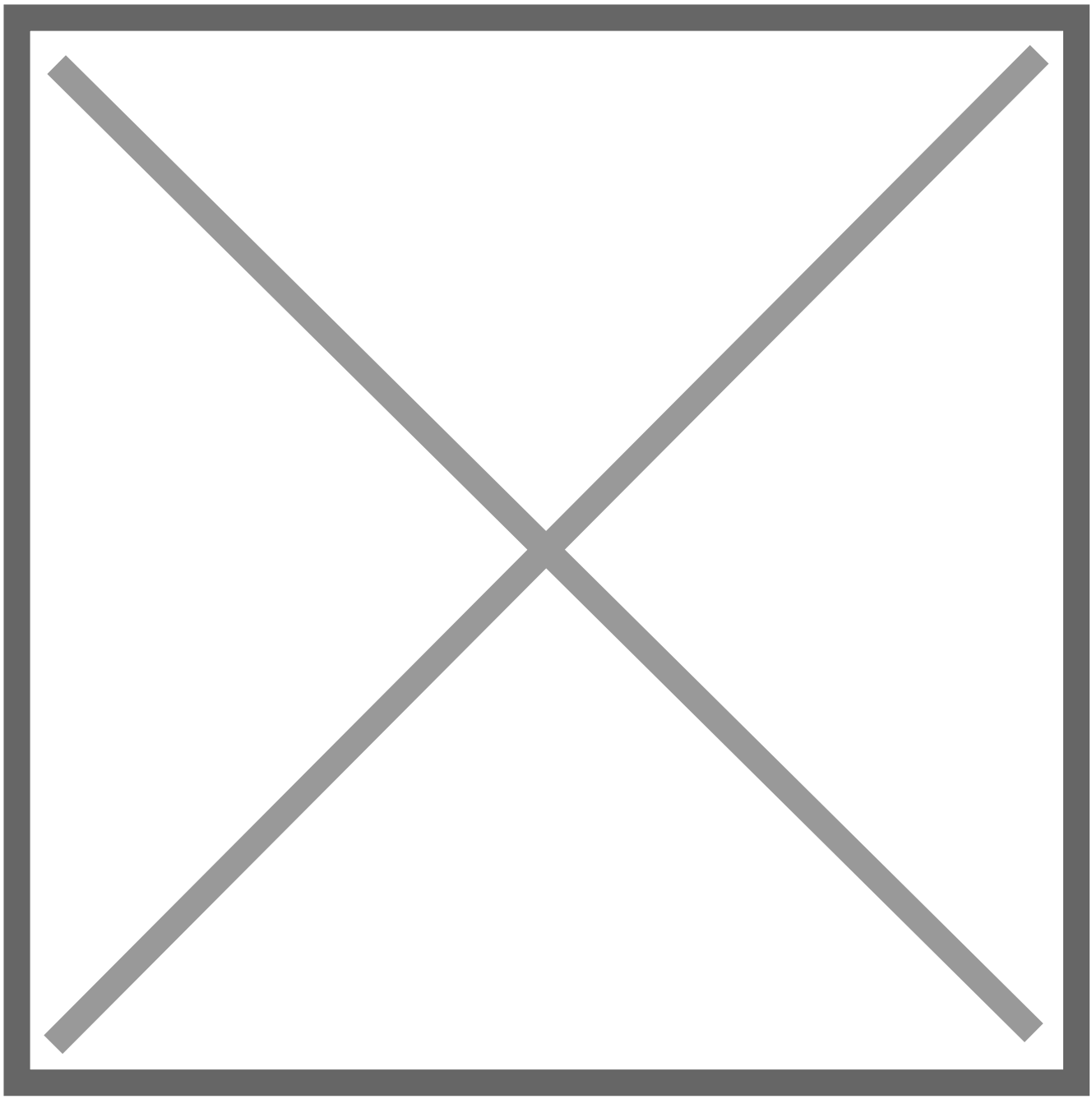
News



Cheryllyn Branche, president of the GU272 Descendants Association, participates in a discussion about healing as a church and nation Feb. 7, 2021, during the virtual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering. (CNS screen grab/CSMG)



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A Catholic panel analyzing a path forward during moments of strife or of social sin said the only way to move ahead as a society toward healing is to recognize the damage done to a person or communities, to lay the truth out for everyone to see.

The "Healing as Church & Nation: Remembering, Recognizing & Reimagining Common Good," a panel during the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, which took place online Feb. 6-9 this year, also looked at how Pope Francis' teachings can help.

Through the lens of the pope's new encyclical, Catholics can reflect on society's interconnectedness and why the problems, or solutions, of one group are a problem for all, panelists said.

A prerecorded session featured Cheryllyn Branche, president of the GU272 Descendants Association, a nonprofit representing over 10,000 living and deceased descendants of enslaved children, women and men sold by the Jesuits of Georgetown University in 1838.

She addressed the situation that arose when students at Georgetown discovered that members of the Society of Jesus who had founded the prestigious school had bought and sold children and adults, including her ancestors, into slavery in the 1800s.

As a Catholic, she said, she has asked the question: "How can a Catholic order of men ... seek to find God in all things and dedicate [itself] to the greater of glory of God while denying our ancestors, enslaved children women and men, their freedom and dignity?"

But facing the truth of what happened is essential in any effort, even when it brings about pain, but it brings up the question of "how do we recognize where we've been, how do we see what harm has happened in our past and how do we move forward in a way again that's fitting of Catholics?" said panelist Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of Catholic Mobilizing Network.

Vaillancourt Murphy has long worked nationally in faith-based policy advocacy and the organization she heads is working toward ending the death penalty and promoting restorative justice.

The pope's encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti," released this year, offers a path "for renewed encounter moving forward," she said, which initiates "processes of healing." In her field, she looks at the killing of men and women through execution by the state and advocates instead for restorative justice, which seeks to focus on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community.

But the criminal justice system in the U.S. instead is one engaged in the "throwaway culture" the pope references, she said, one of mass incarceration surrounded by the "culture of death" that was put on display recently.

"We're still reeling," she said, from a "spree" of executions carried out by the federal government in the last days of the Trump administration — there were 13 executions from July 2020 through January 2021.

The panel was first organized seeking ways to unite the nation after a polarizing political period, which was addressed by Kim Daniels, co-director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown.

A question that had popped up, even before the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol Jan. 6, was "where do we go after that, as a hurting nation?" Daniels asked.

Faced with a crisis that has developed after a divisive election period and an unprecedent mob attack on Washington, it's time for Catholics to assess the present moment, she said.

"This is a real challenge for American Catholics, as to how we're going to respond. Are we going to stand for truth and justice? Are we going to stand for the vulnerable? Are we going to look for a better kind of politics? A politics that is truly in the service of the common good and move away from this kind of violence and this kind of fear?" she asked.

Catholic social teaching provides a path for how to move forward out of the strife, she said, referencing also the pope's teachings.

"He [the pope] tries to resist the throwaway culture and build a culture of encounter. He leads with mercy and focuses on a church for the poor. He is always reaching out to those at the margins," Daniels said. "It helps us resist individualism. It reminds us that we're all in this together ... as an integrated whole. There's no left and right in Catholic social teaching and that helps us come to the public conversation with a real renewal of our idea of resisting the division in public life."

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