News



The June 14 virtual panel on "Building the Beloved Community: Addressing Racial Injustice and Finding Ways Forward," sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. Top row, from left: Kimberly Mazyck, Kathleen Dorsey Bellow and Gabby Trejo. Bottom row, from left: Fr. Stephen Thorne and Marcia Chatelain. (Courtesy of Georgetown University)



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The U.S. Catholic Church must recommit to work on racial justice in order to build the "beloved community," said participants in a June 14 panel hosted by Georgetown University.

"Racial healing is a mandate and, as American Catholics, we have work to do," said Fr. Stephen Thorne, chair of the Commission on Racial Healing for the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

Thorne said racial healing must focus on personal encounter, formation and action. "This is not something that is political. It is not a Democratic or Republican thing. This is a Jesus thing," he said.

Thorne was speaking as part of a virtual panel sponsored by Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life in Washington, D.C. Also taking part were Gabby Trejo, executive director of Sacramento Area Congregations Together, and academics Marcia Chatelain and Kathleen Dorsey Bellow. The panel was moderated by Kimberly Mazyck, associate director of the initiative.

Chatelain, who was professor of history and African American studies at Georgetown University and will begin teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall, spoke about the debt that the history of slaveholding, and particularly Catholic slaveholding, has created in America.

"If you are serious about racial justice, you understand that the debt will never be retired in your lifetime. And you see that as an opportunity and not a burden," she said.

> 'People don't always see themselves in what you find at the Catholic store, and it keeps people from understanding that Catholic is universal.'
>
> —Kathleen Dorsey Bellow
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The Second Vatican Council and popes afterward have affirmed and reaffirmed the importance of "cultural competence" in ministry, said Dorsey Bellow, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans.

"That's a big challenge in a world where you have European American as the primary face of the Catholic church, and those who buy into that and see nothing else as being authentically Catholic," Dorsey Bellow said.

Trejo emphasized the role of "wrestling" with the pain of other communities, particularly the African American community, and recognizing "that we're going to fumble" in multiracial organizing.

"The most important thing that we get to do in our community" is investing time and building deep relationships, building trust that "we are in deep in a relationship where we can stretch each other like a rubber band, but not break," Trejo said.

Trejo also highlighted the importance of asking, "Who's missing from our table?"

In response to an audience question, panelists discussed the movement to remove Confederate statues from public spaces.

"Statues are the worst kind of civil idolatry. I think they're bad for people because they obscure the reality of the past," said Chatelain.

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Chatelain said that part of the problem is that "during the George Floyd summer, a lot of statues went down, but nothing was built up." The murder of Floyd, a Black man, by an on-duty police officer during the summer of 2020 set off nationwide protests.

"As people of faith, we should really stand strongly against statues," she said.

Dorsey Bellow related Confederate statues to specific images of God and Jesus that people become "fixed on."

"When we invest so much in European expressions of the faith, it's an idolatry," Dorsey Bellow said. "It is very problematic because people don't always see themselves in what you find at the Catholic store, and it keeps people from understanding that Catholic is universal and the U.S. is supposed to be a home for many people," she said.

The Georgetown panel was organized around the theme: "Building the Beloved Community: Addressing Racial Injustice and Finding Ways Forward."

The "beloved community" is a phrase that was popularized by Martin Luther King Jr. about a vision for a society without poverty, violence or discrimination.