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A black and white photo of protesters on the National Mall carrying signs for racial justice

A banner for the National Council of Churches is seen among hundreds of signs carried by participants in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Aug. 28, 1963. The march speakers included several religious leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, and Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington. Sixty years later, panelists at a Georgetown University panel say work must still be done to fulfill Dr. King's vision. (OSV News photo/courtesy Library of Congress)

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Sixty years after the March on Washington, there is still work to be done to make the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream a reality, a Georgetown University panel said Aug. 28.

On Aug. 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, marking a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement seeking greater racial and economic justice in the United States. Civil rights leaders including Dr. King organized the march to call for an end to

segregation, and racial discrimination, and to call for protections for things like voting rights. At that event, Dr. King delivered his now-famous "I have a Dream" address, challenging America by saying, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Kim Daniels, director of Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life and an adjunct professor in the Jesuit university's department of theology and religious studies, noted that then-Washington Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle delivered the invocation at that event. The archbishop encouraged Catholics to participate and to host participants who traveled in from out of town.

"He called on everybody to live in dignity, justice, charity and peace," Daniels said. "We know it's just as vital today as it was 60 years ago. It can also be just as heart-wrenching."

Among the panelists at the event was Sr. Anita Baird, the U.S. provincial for her order, the Religious Congregation of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, who was the founding director of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Racial Justice and is a past president of the National Black Sisters' Conference.

Also on the panel were Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, one of the original sponsors of the March on Washington 60 years ago and a former mayor of New Orleans; Andrew Prevot, holder of the Amaturo Chair in Catholic Studies and a professor of theology at Georgetown University and co-editor of the book "Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics"; and Lauren Reliford, political director at Sojourners, a Christian organization committed to advocacy for social justice.

John Carr, the event's moderator and the Initiative's founder, recognized those in attendance who went to the march, saying "they came together and against all odds they changed the nation."

Carr said Catholics and all Americans should "think about what the march meant and what it calls us to do now."

"Black unemployment: Black people were twice as likely to be jobless 60 years ago -- still the case. Black poverty was twice what it was for whites -- still the case," Carr said, adding, "Some things have changed and some have not."

Morial said the recent racist killing of three Black Americans by a white gunman in Jacksonville, Florida, was a "stark reminder that racially motivated hate and violence is too common in America today."

"Whether it was Jacksonville or Buffalo, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Mother Emanuel Church, I could continue to go on. How can violence be such a weapon so common to affect our fellow citizens?" he asked.

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Social justice is a primary tenant of the Catholic faith, Morial added.

"I appeal to those of you who are of the Catholic faith to not allow the continued diminution of that as a fundamental principle of Catholicism in second or third place from other issues that may be very important," he said.

Baird said that "we are failing as a nation" to live up to Dr. King's dream.

"We have to remain vigilant and we have to remain -- and also remain hopeful," she said, calling it a "real concern" that faith leaders need to vocally address.

"I have concern today because we are not hearing the voices about faith leaders, particularly our Catholic faith leaders," Baird said. "As Dr. King said, it has to be faith. It has to be love. It has to be the Gospel that will free us from this hate."

Panelists said that while progress has been made -- including the election of the first Black U.S. president and Black vice president, former President Barack Obama and current Vice President Kamala Harris respectively -- there remains work to be done on equality. Panelists noted the March on Washington was about equality -- as well as jobs and fair wages.

Prevot urged an emphasis on Catholic social teaching and a preferential option for the poor in responding to lingering issues of racial and economic justice.

"It is true that over the last 60 years a number of Black people have made their way through a lot of hard work from poverty into the middle class," Prevot said. "But -- there is a big exception here, the middle class is shrinking and the lines between poverty and the middle class are harder to draw."

Reliford said the nation should take a "nuanced" look at its policy, citing the example of a woman with children becoming ineligible for SNAP benefits over work requirements if she chooses to attend school full time, despite that being an investment in her future earning potential. In general, recipients of SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, must work about 30 hours a week.

Reliford said in her work she seeks to remember that "my God is good."

"It's a bit of spirit and it's also just leaning into your charisms," she said. "And I highly recommend you look into charisms and what that means as a Catholic to be made to help other people."