News



Rita Hollie, Rashonda Alexander and Dr. Kelly Schmidt present at the inaugural Catholic Religious Organizations Studying Slavery (CROSS) Conference in St. Louis Oct. 31. (Black Catholic Messenger/Nate Tinner-Williams)

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Perhaps somewhat unique among Catholic jurisdictions in the United States, the St. Louis Archdiocese possesses an ignominious distinction related to slavery: Both of its first two bishops — Joseph Rosati and Peter Kenrick — held a number of African Americans in bondage while serving as prelates of the church.

This was one of several jarring realities shared during the inaugural conference of Catholic Religious Organizations Studying Slavery (CROSS), held in the Rome of the West Oct. 30-31 for presentations, prayer and possibilities at the intersection of Catholic archives and the nation's original sin.

The St. Louis Archdiocese, which has largely led the way in making documents related to Catholic slavery available to the public, featured heavily during the conference, with current and former local professionals presenting alongside a bevy of academics, genealogists, bishops, and affected descendants.

Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Kentucky, who helped spearhead the CROSS organization during his time as chair of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, opened the event with a keynote urging dioceses to commit to truth-telling in their archival work.



Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Kentucky, addresses the inaugural Catholic Religious Organizations Studying Slavery (CROSS) Conference Oct. 30 in St. Louis. (Black Catholic Messenger/Nate Tinner-Williams)

"If we do not tell our own story, then someone else or some entity will almost certainly provide a biased rendition, which may not be guided by the virtue of truth and faith, as ours hopefully will be," he said.

"Accordingly, my dear friends, it is far better that we share our own stories — no matter how painful, no matter how sinful."

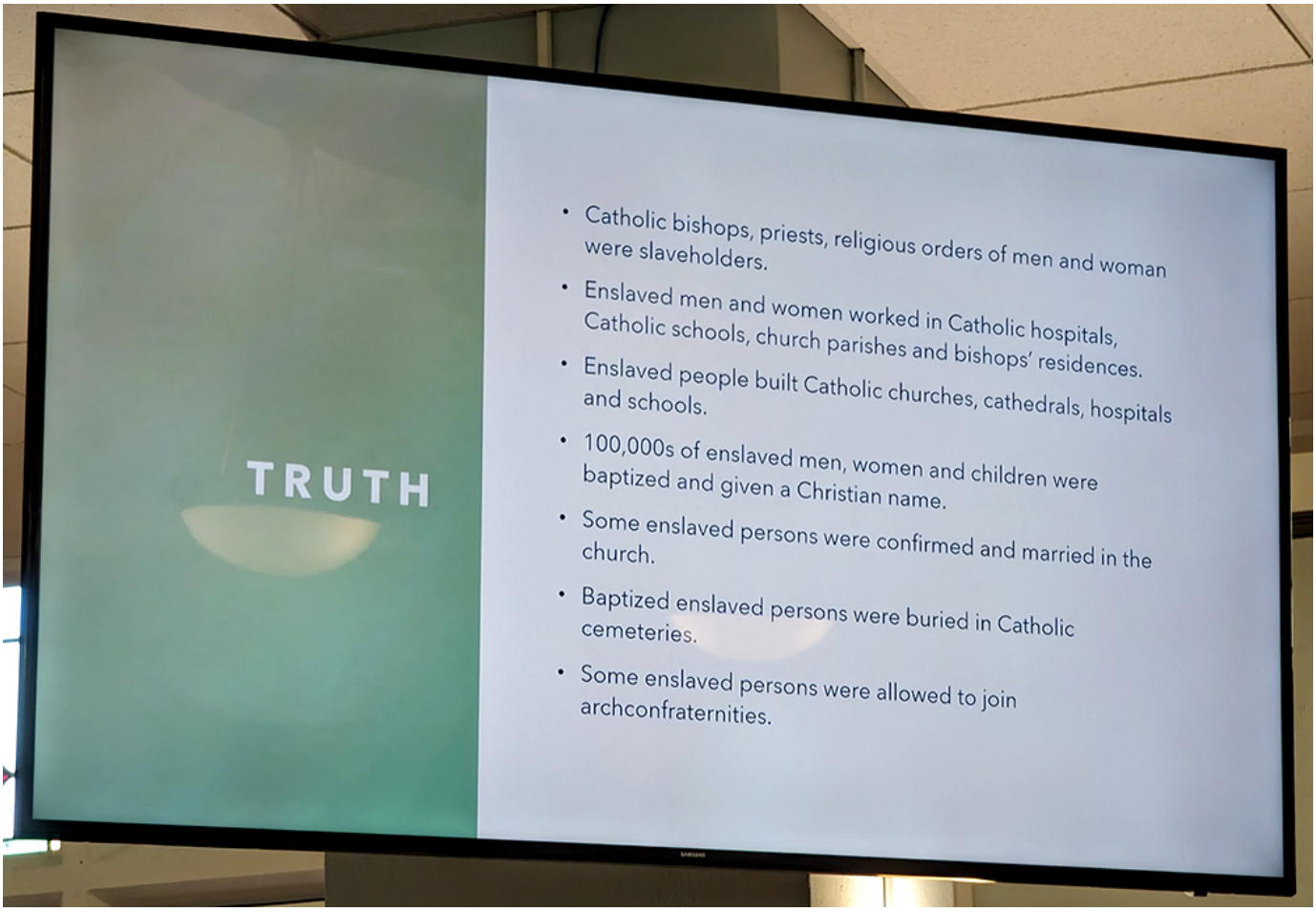
The various sessions of the conference ran the gamut from research presentations to case studies to testimonials from African Americans descended from those enslaved by various Catholic groups, including the world's largest religious order, the Society of Jesus.

The Jesuits' former U.S. and Canada president, Fr. Tim Kesicki, who works with the order's billion-dollar Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation, spoke on how

his order has come to terms with its slaveholding since the history became international news in the past decade.

"I can tell you that we only were telling half of our story, that which was published," he said on Tuesday, referring to the period before Rachel Swarns' bombshell 2016 article on the issue for The New York Times.

Similar stories came to light at the conference from the Sisters of Loretto, when Sr. Eleanor Craig explained how her community — long regarded as progressive and forward-thinking — was forced to reckon with the reality that they, too, owned slaves early in their history.



A slide during a presentation at the Catholic Religious Organizations Studying Slavery (CROSS) Conference, held Oct. 30-31 in St. Louis (Black Catholic Messenger/Nate Tinner-Williams)

Also striking was a retelling of early St. Louis history by archdiocesan archivist Eric Fair, who explained how the diocese's first bishop, Rosati, not only owned slaves but

was taken to court by at least one who sought freedom.

"Aspasia [LeCompte] sued Bishop Rosati in 1837 and her rationale was that her mother Judy had lived in the Northwest Territory, which included Illinois and was a free territory, for two years," Fair noted, evoking similarities to the story of Dred Scott, a St. Louisan who famously lost his freedom suit in 1857 before the U.S. Supreme Court. LeCompte, too, was unsuccessful.

"Rather than fight the lawsuit, Rosati sold Aspasia to [St. Louis University professor] Hardage Lane," Fair said.

Interestingly, while some participants at the conference spoke of efforts in their own contexts to remove the names of slaveholders from places of honor, the names of Rosati and Kenrick remain in various Catholic spaces in St. Louis. Even the building where the CROSS Conference was held, the Cardinal Rigali Center, prominently displays at its entrance the Sacred Heart sister St. Rose Philippine Duchesne — who was gifted an enslaved person by Bishop Louis DuBourg of Louisiana and the Two Floridas in the early 19th century. (DuBourg, rejected by his flock in the South, lived at the time in St. Louis.)

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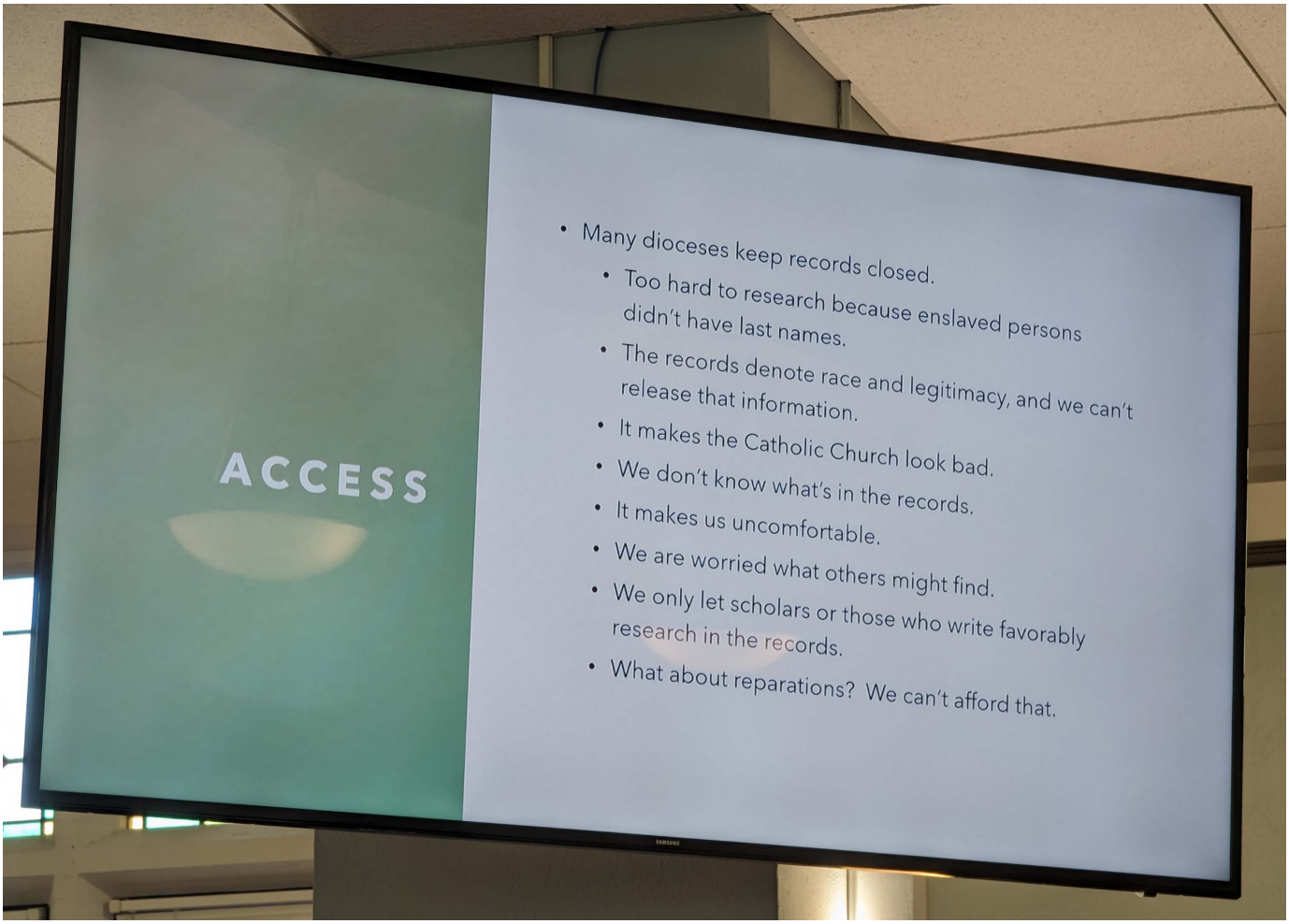
"This is a journey that we are just starting, so these are conversations that we will be having," Fair said when asked about possible renaming plans in Missouri. "We don't want to be the ones that are dictating what we will do and how we will do it. We want the community to be involved with the highest levels of these decisions."

Community participation was a major theme during the two days of convening, and it was admitted that the current landscape of archives access — especially when the documents are sensitive, due to slavery or other unsavory factors — is a patchwork affair across the nation.

Some institutions, like the Redemptorists, Jesuits, or Sacred Heart Sisters, and the (Arch)dioceses of New Orleans, Cincinnati, St. Augustine in Florida, and St. Louis, are more open than others. In other places, however, officials as high as the bishop himself might deny access if they deem documents unfit for public access.

For now, no national policy exists concerning access to church archives, though CROSS is perhaps aiming to change that.

"One of the purposes of us gathering here is to begin the process of kind of pushing a little bit in a respectful way to some of the dioceses that are rather closed," said Fr. David Endres, a professor in Ohio who has edited several recent historical surveys of marginalized Catholic groups.



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Asked if the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been receptive to the idea of assisting with the work of making Catholic archives more open, Emilie Gagnet Leumas (formerly of New Orleans) was optimistic.

"The Spirit is certainly moving us in that direction," she said.

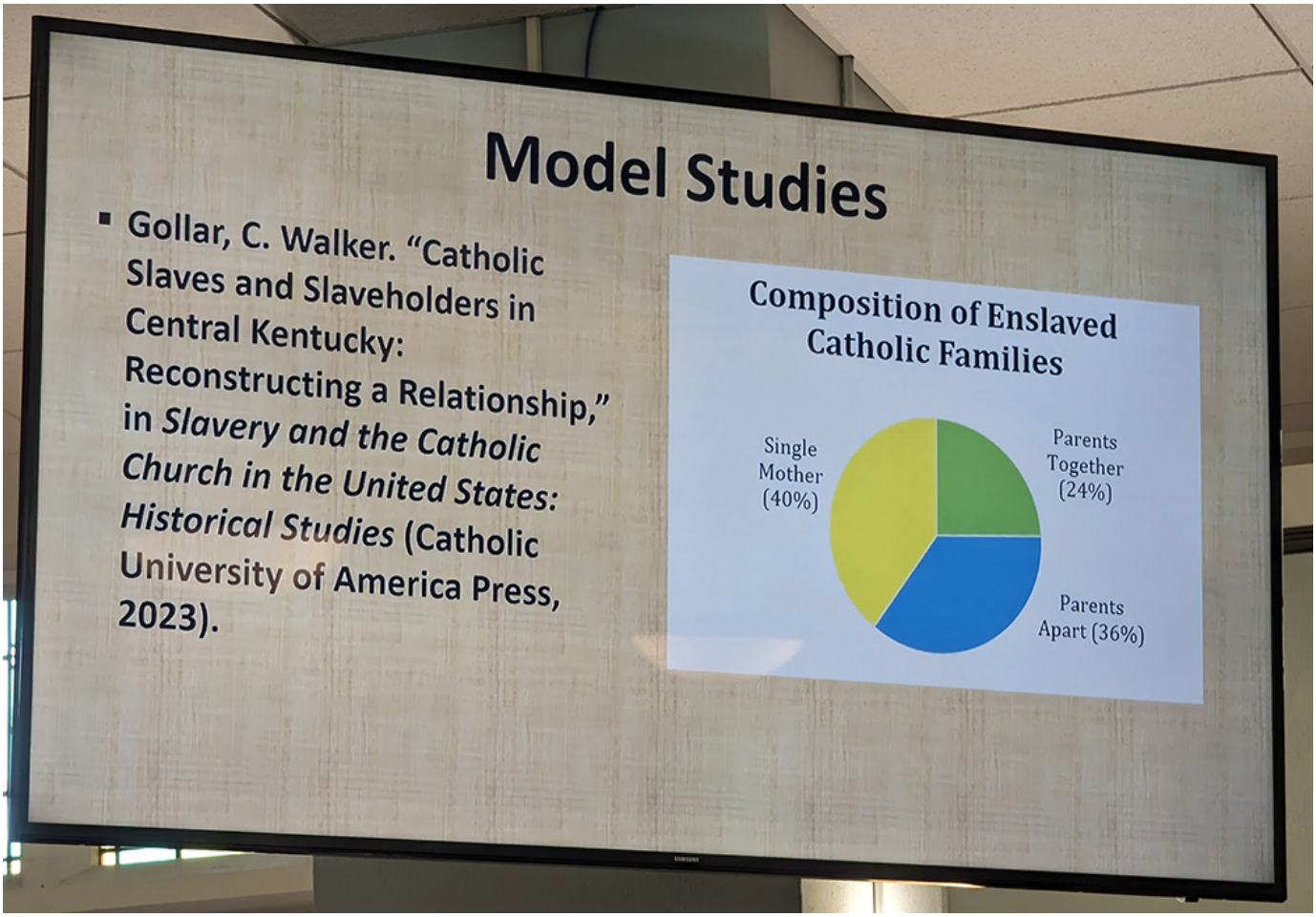
"They are hearing us, which is really good, and they do know that this work is being done."

For now, much of CROSS' work centers around its new Best Practices Guide. It's a 16-page document that helps archivists not only uncover links to slavery and make the documents accessible, but also include descendants in their work and avoid pitfalls related to historical misconceptions and unwarranted fears.

Patrick Hayes, who works with the Redemptorist Archives in Philadelphia, noted that some of the immediate goals for the organization include working with more African Americans in the field. The archivists at the conference were mostly white, and it is estimated that only a few working for the church in the U.S. are Black.

Also at issue is the availability of Spanish-language resources and professionals who can create them, as the earliest records of American Catholic history involve the Spanish crown and its dealings in places such as Puerto Rico and Florida.

"We've got a lot of deficits, for sure," Hayes said.



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By all appearances, the two days in St. Louis seemed to be a step in the right direction. The various archivists present were exposed to the challenges and successes of their peers and also the experiences of Catholics on the ground, many of them African Americans, who are in most need of the data and history they possess.

Perhaps most importantly, the spiritual work of uncovering uncomfortable histories related to slavery (at a Catholic conference, no less) was also not forgotten. The official conference schedule included a prayer session with a local Black Catholic historian, and at one point during the other presentations, an impromptu rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" — sung by Joyce Jones and 91-year-old Alvin Brooks—brought new gravity to the gathering.

Rashonda Alexander, another Black Catholic who descends from the African Americans enslaved by the Jesuits, implored that the archivists, above all, be conscious of the cosmic importance of their work.

"Keep the Holy Spirit involved in this, because you can do everything that man does, thinking that you know everything, but God is really in control," she said near the end of the conference.

"Continue to remember that this is bigger than you when you're doing this work."