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Celebration holds first annual conference on effective worship

by Pat Marrin



A gathering of liturgical ministers and preachers meets July 30-31 in Cincinnati to assess the state of worship as the church's response to social and economic hard times. (NCR photo/Linda Romey)

Editors, unlike reporters, don't get out of the office much. So the first annual *Celebration* Conference on Effective Liturgy, held July 30-31 in Cincinnati, marked a real shift of gears for me -- as anyone who spends his days on the phone or in front of a computer screen knows.

NCR publisher Joe Feuerherd clearly believes that, given the state of publishing these days, we can't sit around watching circulation numbers when we know that people are out there, talking and doing what we support with *Celebration* and *NCR*. I met with around 150 of them last week, listened and prayed with them about the challenges they face as preachers and liturgical ministers.

I didn't need to leave the office to learn that effective liturgy means attention to two things:

First, fidelity to the sources of worship, namely the sacred scriptures and the church's unbroken tradition

of the assembly that gathers to break open the scriptures and share the ritual action of Eucharist in which we do by heart what Jesus taught us and in the doing become what God wants us to be, the body of Christ in the world.

Second, worship is relevant when tied to what is really happening in the world. How can we worship without urgent reference to the collapse of the global economy, a slow tsunami that, despite our wish that it soon be over, the market go back up, we get back to our lifestyles, is the wolf at the door for millions of our neighbors facing unemployment, default and foreclosure on what once seemed assured and self-sufficient lives? How can we worship without recognition that part of our national calamity is that a huge deficit is funding the hoped-for recovery, paying for two wars against a shadowy enemy who, we are told, may already be in our midst and therefore requires a police state to protect us and our basic rights and freedoms?

Can our pulpits remain silent while unresolved issues of race and poverty run like visible scars through American culture? And while the fate of 12 million people is left in limbo for want of immigration reform, among them our own Catholic brothers and sisters, welcomed to harvest, slaughter, prepare and serve our food, pave our sidewalks, fix our roofs, make our beds and clean our hotel bathrooms, but alienated and despised for seeking a path to citizenship?

How can we worship if our sharing of the Word and our standing together at the family table of Eucharist does not address all this fear and suffering?

The conference was blessed with seven eloquent speakers who dared name our interrelated crises and suggested that hope is the essential goal of worship and preaching.

Gabe Huck, whose countless books and articles illuminated the vision of the Second Vatican Council for an entire generation of pastors and ministers, reminded us why the renewal of the liturgy was the blueprint for the renewal of the church, for parish assemblies called to full, conscious, active participation in both worship and the mission of their church. What happened to the momentum of the great council and why? How can the liturgy be the dynamo it was meant to be, the source of the hope and holiness that transforms the world?

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, preeminent Old Testament scholar and preacher, spoke on the powerful biblical narrative of God's covenant as the basis for economic justice and national policy that alone can recover neighborhood from the collapse of market capitalism.

NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. reprised his forthcoming book *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (Random House, November 2009). The rise of the Southern Hemisphere, falling fertility rates for the white populations in Europe and the United States, the surge of evangelical Christianity and fundamentalist religions around the world are changing everything we thought we knew about the future.

Dominican Sr. Jamie Phelps, director of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, invoked the prophetic ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for not just racial equality but for the soul of the nation and the survival of American democracy.

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Rafael Sánchez Alonso, representing *Celebration's* scripture editor Patricia Sánchez, described preaching

as the dialogue between Athens and Jerusalem, the world and the church, the newspaper and the scriptures, with personal accounts of the immigration raid in Mississippi to urge a bold response by the church in the face of great suffering.

Holy Cross Fr. Dan Groody, director of the Center for Latino Spirituality and Culture at Notre Dame University's Institute for Latino Studies, addressed the urgent need for immigration reform in a time of economic stress and cultural polarization, while vast numbers of refugees worldwide, driven by complex forces in the global economy, cross borders to survive.

Sister of Mercy of the Blessed Virgin Mary Helen Garvey invited the conference to the traveling exhibit "Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America," which is bound for a showing at the Smithsonian in Washington in 2011. The dramatic history of religious women reveals effective evangelization that helped shape education, health care, social service and justice ministry in the United States.

Share the conference, first in the accompanying abridged version of Brueggemann's talk (see story), in future issues of *NCR*, and in *Celebration*, *NCR*'s sister publication (www.CelebrationPublications.org).

Pat Marrin is editor of Celebration.

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