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Seamless garment discussion eases tension among Catholic activists

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 18, 2010

ARBUTUS, MD. -- Nearly 50 Catholics actively engaged in fighting abortion or in advocacy on a range of peace and social justice issues gathered here at Our Lady of Mount-Providence Center for a three-day Seamless Garment Dialogue March 5-7.

Jesuit Fr. John P. Langan, the Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Professor of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University in Washington, said that one of the reasons behind tensions between pro-life advocates and peace-and-justice advocates in the church is that these issues are tied in with America?s culture wars.

?The debate about abortion is not a purely internal debate? in the church, but one that goes on in a political context, he said.

Speaking midway through the three-day dialogue, Langan praised the participants for struggling to deal with their differences on such issues with an attitude of mutual respect.

The dialogue was sponsored by the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative and hosted by the Oblate Sisters of Providence at their center in Arbutus, a Baltimore suburb. Fr. Joseph Lynch, a Marianist from New York, served as facilitator of the dialogue.

Langan said a consistent ethic of life, based on the sanctity and dignity of every human life, underlies the Catholic stance on abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, poverty, war, gun control and many other issues.

The late Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago articulated that consistent ethic in a series of speeches in 1983 and 1984. In answer to a question following one talk, Bernardin likened the consistent ethic to a ?seamless garment? -- a phrase that quickly caught on as a metaphor for that approach.

Highlighting the integration of moral and social teaching under the sanctity of life banner in Catholicism, Langan noted that many evangelicals are in sympathy with the church on abortion, but not on many of its social justice stands, while liberal Protestants may be in sympathy on social issues but become ?skittish? when it comes to legally curbing abortion.

The consistent ethic approach ?crossed the line between liberal and conservative, between Democratic and Republican,? he said. From the perspective of U.S. politics, ?the bishops are on the left on economic issues. They?re to the right or conservative on issues of sexual morality. They?re moderately left on racism, international issues, immigration.?

?This will create fault lines, where people will say, ?You?re not fully with me. You don?t really understand my vision of justice,? ? he said.

For Catholics it poses another dilemma, he suggested: whether to be consistently Catholic and therefore an ?inconsistent Democrat or inconsistent Republican,? or whether to be a consistent Democrat or Republican.

He also reviewed briefly the development of Catholic teaching on social issues such as private property, a living wage and other social safety nets since the late 19th century, and commented, ?It?s important to remember that this body of teaching was worked out in relative independence from Catholic moral teaching -- not in opposition, but independently.?

At a morning panel session March 6, Nancy Dwyer, a retired writer and editor of *The Long Island Catholic*, diocesan newspaper of Rockville Centre, N.Y., illustrated how deep the tensions over pro-life and social justice priorities can run with a story about the justice and peace committee she used to chair at her home parish in Valley Stream, N.Y.

When the parish got a new pastor in 2007, she said, at his first meeting with parishioners he invited questions. One man immediately stood up and started complaining about ?this Nancy Dwyer? and the parish justice and peace group entering partisan politics by criticizing the war; he said the group should be spending its time opposing abortion. The next parishioner to speak offered the same criticisms but focused on the committee?s practice of using the Sunday bulletin to list the names of U.S. troops killed in combat that week.

Soon after that, she said, the first man began attending every meeting of the committee in order to, in his words, ?monitor? it.

?It quickly became obvious that he really intended to disrupt our meetings,? she said. ?No matter what the topic was, he turned it to abortion. Like I suggested we get involved with the Jesuits? campaign against torture -- this is a Jesuit parish -- but he would break in and say, ?Is it torture to abort a baby?? ?

Dwyer recalled one particularly bad occasion, when the pastor stopped by and the man and his buddy turned the meeting into a rant against the committee until the pastor walked out. ?From then on we never published the time and place of our meetings. It felt like we were meeting in a catacomb,? she said.

In a later phone conversation, she told *NCR* she was thrilled by the three-day dialogue. Learning to really listen to others ?is needed in our church, our society, politics, the media. Everybody is always yelling at everybody, because people aren?t listening.?

Marianist Fr. Ted Cassidy, who runs the Marianist Family Retreat Center in Cape May Point, N.J., told *NCR* he was ?very thankful that the group came together? and he thought it was a fruitful dialogue.

Most participants were active primarily on justice and peace issues, he said, but there were several for whom the fight against abortion is their primary concern, including one person who runs a center for pregnant women in difficulty and two or three who head the pro-life committee in their respective parishes.

He said at one session a ?woman who is strongly antiabortion expressed her views? and for the next half-hour members of the group who do not give the same priority to abortion entered into a real dialogue with her.

Bruce Segall, who has been a principal of public and Catholic high schools in New York and New Jersey, said there is a need in the church to develop the skills of dialogue. ?I came away with a deeper appreciation of the issues,? he said.

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