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Call to Action Conference opens in Milwaukee

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MILWAUKEE -- The annual national Call to Action gathering, held each year in early November, opened in Milwaukee Friday evening.

CTA Executive Director set a welcoming tone for some 2,000 restless Catholic souls in his welcoming remarks. He told those gathered to be the church they envision and to not wait for the Catholic hierarchy to give them permission to take those steps.

Said FitzGerald: "My sisters and brothers, changing minds of those in the hierarchy can no longer be the benchmark of progress. We cannot wait for those with institutional power to create a church that welcomes everyone equally. We must do this. God is calling on each and every one of us, from every generation, to be church to one another."

The annual November Call to Action gathering draws together renewal and reform-minded Catholics from around the nation and beyond. They spend the weekend talking about church and social issues. In addition to keynote speakers, the gathering offers numerous workshops and allows time for soul mates to come together to be reminded they are not alone in their struggles for church renewal.

The following are Fitzgerald's welcoming remarks:

On behalf of Call To Action's staff, board of directors, and volunteers, it is with great joy to say ?
Welcome Home.

This annual homecoming has become a very special part of our Catholic experience ? a safe place, where issues can be debated and explored, without fear of being judged, a place where people of like minds can return and reconnect.

At last year's conference, it was by surprise that I reconnected with one of my classmates from Hartford Seminary ? her first conference gathering. As we said good-bye on Sunday, she said her experience of hearing the hopes and struggles of our movement, reminded her of the story our feminist theology professor. I remembered it too.

It is the story of a Rabbi and his student sitting in prayer. In that moment of silence, the student becomes overwhelmed with appreciation for his mentor and says to the Rabbi, "Rabbi, I love you!"

The Rabbi made no response, but rather continued to sit quietly.

Thinking that his teacher hadn't heard him, the pupil said once again, slightly louder, "Rabbi, I love you!"

His mentor shifted a bit as if to regain the quiet of prayer.

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Now feeling dismissed, the student said with a hint of frustration in his voice, "Rabbi, did you hear me, I said I love you."

Finally, the Rabbi left his silent place of prayer and looked at his student with love in his eyes and gently said: "Do you know what hurts me? Because until you know what hurts me, you cannot love me."

My classmate boarded her shuttle van to the airport and said, "This is what Call To Action understands and what the institutional church does not!"

The Vatican doesn't understand that lesson as it issues statements that equate the sexual abuse of children with women seeking ordination. But Call To Action does understand that lesson as continues its collaboration with Women's Ordination Conference to sponsor the Shatter the Stained Glass Ceiling Tour? the largest speaker's tour on women's equality in the church ever ? over 30 cities and still going strong.

Members of the Catholic hierarchy who spend millions of dollars on anti-gay campaigns around the country certainly don't get it. But we understand equality for all in our church which makes me so excited to see Call To Action formally joined with Dignity USA, Fortunate Families, and New Ways Ministry to form a new Catholic coalition called Equally Blessed. This coalition combines all our organizational strengths in advocating on LGBT equality in our church.

The fact that racism continues to play a devastating role in our church and communities shows we have a long way to go as a society to understand the Rabbi's wisdom. But Call To Action understands the importance of addressing racism as it continues the important work of dismantling exclusive structures within our own organization. This year, members from every Call To Action leadership constituency participated in a transformative training offered by Crossroads Ministries as part of Call To Action's ongoing commitment to transform Call To Action into an anti-racist/anti-oppression organization.

The institutional Church shows it doesn't know what hurts people when it regularly attacks conscience

decisions made by the faithful. But our local Call To Action chapters around the country understand how important acting according to an informed conscience. A coalition of Call To Action chapters came together this past summer to provide an important Catholic voice in support of Sr. Mary McBride in Arizona. Thanks to local Call To Action chapters, critical local justice issues around the country are being addressed in a pastoral way, regardless of diocesan actions.

We are a model of church and we strive to follow Jesus' command "love one another as I have loved you."

This year's conference theme recognizes that the prophetic voice of God that is alive and well in each and every one of us "from all walks of life, in every generation."

While polls show the gap between young adults and the institutional Church continues to grow, young adults have increasingly become engaged with Call To Action. From conference planning committee to our anti-racism team, from our strategic planning committee to serving on our national board and staff. This success of our young adult outreach over the last several years is due, in large part, to my colleague Nicole Sotelo. I'd like to invite Nicole to the podium to share some remarks about CTA's young adult outreach initiatives.

The church is the people of God and it has become clearer than ever that the church justice movement is at a critical turning point. My sisters and brothers, changing minds of those in the hierarchy can no longer be the benchmark of progress. We cannot wait for those with institutional power to create a church that welcomes everyone equally. We must do this. God is calling on each and every one of us, from every generation, to be church to one another.

It was with that in mind that a strategic planning team consisting of a diverse cross section of Call To Action members took the feedback from over 1,000 CTA members and spent this past year laying the foundation for a five-year strategic. Our strategic planning process raised the question, if we remain true to our purpose now, what is possible for Call To Action to become in the future? If we're true to our purpose now, Call To Action will be the leader in challenging Catholics to act for justice and build inclusive communities.

How can we reach that vision?

We'll make our church more just and inclusive by educating Catholics that every individual has the right to act according to an informed conscience and has the responsibility to promote the equality and dignity of all people.

We'll make our church more just and inclusive by inspiring Catholics to recognize that we are the people of God and that we are called to live lives rooted in the Gospel and the people of God are accountable to the Creator and each other.

We'll make our church more just and inclusive by activating Catholics to boldly work for justice and hold the institutional Church accountable.

We will educate, inspire, and activate Catholics to act for justice and build inclusive communities, and it's essential that we take the principles from the years of our anti-racism and anti-oppression work to be the lens through which we see our agenda.

In doing so, we ensure that those of us with power, privilege, and influence don't unintentionally support systems and structures that exclude. A simple, but profound experience years ago in my previous employment taught me that my good intentions are not enough to be inclusive.

About ten years ago, I directed a youth peer education program of about 30-40 youth. My agency's senior management team charged us directors to provide a year-end recognition event to honor the work of our volunteer peer educators and their families. I went right to work. I reserved a spot right next to the lake at a state park, arranged for games, prizes, recognition gifts, and told everyone "Don't bring anything to eat? I've got it" and I personally cooked hot dogs and hamburgers for all 100 guests. The kids had a great time. Their families told me out much the recognition meant to them. I decided to do the same event year and year.

However, I was always bothered by the fact that two members of the youth group and their families never came to the year-end event. When they didn't come the first year, I figured it was due to a scheduling conflict. When they didn't come the second year, I shrugged it off thinking "their loss." When they didn't come the third year, I was hurt because I believed that they just didn't realize how much work I put into the event - the logistics, the planning, all the hot dogs and hamburgers that I cooked!

They were vegetarian. And, I had only hot dogs and hamburgers on the menu.

A simple example with an important lesson.

My good intentions are not enough. The principles from our anti-racism and anti-oppression work make certain that those with power don't simply set the table and determine the menu and then make invitations. Anti-racism/anti-oppression principles make us understand that real inclusion means power is shared, table settings and menus are determined together and institutional structures that keep power in the hands of those with privilege, are finally dismantled and come down.

Whether it be our work for gender equality, our work for full inclusion of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender sisters and brothers, our work to open ministry to everyone, when these principles serve as the lens through which we view our work, our stories are shared and new perspectives emerge from the margins.

When these elements of Call To Action's strategic plan - to educate, inspire and activate Catholics to act for justice and build inclusive communities through the lens of anti-racism and anti-oppression principles are put into action, a just and inclusive church will no longer be simply a dream; it will be an inevitable destination.

The Rabbi asked, "Do you know what hurts me? Because unless you know what hurts me, you cannot love me."

May Call To Action continue to be the place where Catholics can be the persons they were created to be. May Call To Action always be a community where we know what hurts the other so that we can authentically love the other. May Call To Action always be an oasis of peace and justice when all around us seems a desert.

When we reach our vision, it will not be institutional church blessing that will signal we've arrived, it will be the transformation of our Catholic community to the church God is calling us to be.

May this weekend be prophetic and transformative.

Amen.

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