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Conference on race in the church asks: Are all welcome?

Gerald J. Beyer | Feb. 17, 2011

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People of diverse backgrounds raise hands during a worship service on the University of Dayton campus in this undated file photo. (Photo courtesy of the University of Dayton Web site)

VIEWPOINT

It was an historic, powerful, and Spirit-filled event.

On January 28-29 about 300 parishoners, Catholic school teachers, principals, and pastoral workers gathered at the University of Dayton for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati's Forum on Race: "Are All Welcome? Race in the Church Today."

According to keynote speaker Fr. Bryan N. Massingale, this was the first time an archdiocese in the U.S devoted an entire event to the topic of race. The planning committee from the archdiocese, ably led by Deacon Royce Winters, director of the diocesan office of African American Catholic ministries, worked for almost two years to bring this long-overdue conversation to fruition.

Although the process was not without hurdles, they garnered the necessary and helpful support of Archbishop Dennis Schnurr and many other staff members from the Archdiocese and the University of Dayton.

The Forum began with an exuberant prayer service and a presentation of moving personal testimonies from people who have felt excluded from the Church due to their race. Their anguished voices were accompanied by somber music and a beautiful performance by the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company.

This set the stage for Fr. Massingale, author of the recent book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. In his profound and inspiring address he described old and new forms of racism, including "foreignness" as a cloak for racism. He also argued that the Church has not always done enough to confront racism.

Yet, in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist we are all equals, and when understood and practiced well these sacraments can promote cross-racial solidarity. The sacraments serve as the wellspring from which "a fundamental symbol structure of radical egalitarianism" flows in Roman Catholicism.

Dr. C. Vanessa White from the Catholic Theological Union struck some similar notes in her prophetic keynote address about the Catholic tradition's failures in the face of racism, calling upon her own experiences of discrimination as an African-American woman in the church.

She also described ten ways that racism has a deleterious effect on the lives of minorities, both in the past and today.

For example, people of color are not always given equal voice in our institutions, and are often hired into jobs with little power and ability to enact positive change. She challenged the church to do its part to eliminate such practices and to welcome all people into its midst.

For my part, I spoke of the continuing relevance of the U.S. bishops' 1979 pastoral letter on racism: *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. I argued that its understanding of the persistent forms of racism, in both personal and structural forms, apply to the situation today. I also contended that the duty to evangelize requires the church to do more to ensure that its condemnation of racism is heard and embraced by all Catholics and members of society.

We must also study, understand, and address white privilege in order to promote racial reconciliation and solidarity. I explained my own blindness to this for most of my life.

The participants engaged in lively and productive conversations in workshops facilitated by Holy Cross Fr. Daniel Groody, associate professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame; Ronaldo Cruz, development director at Pax Christi USA; and the three keynote speakers.

They were clearly eager to draw on their own wealth of knowledge and experience to discuss the problem of racism in the church and broader society. One could sense that they had waited far too long for this opportunity to speak and listen.

So what comes next? As Winters stated in his closing remarks, the next steps begin with each individual reflecting on this forum experience and prayerfully making a decision to change their behavior. This includes setting aside time to have discussions with their loved ones, relatives, children, co-workers and parishioners.

It includes using our prophetic voices to take a stand against injustice, against the evil of racism wherever it exists. It means, as he put it, that we must challenge one another to live what we preach as the followers of Christ -- we are One Body in the Lord.

In this vein, the participants shared the Eucharist together in a liturgy celebrated by Archbishop Schnurr.

We can only hope that other dioceses will replicate the Forum on Race in the near future.

Talking with brothers and sisters in Christ across many generations and racial backgrounds about dismantling what our bishops deemed the "radical evil" of racism was truly a blessing -- one that I pray all members of the Church will experience.

[Gerald J. Beyer is associate professor of theology at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Penn. He delivered a keynote address at The Forum on Race.]

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