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Embracing differences key theme of ecclesiology conference

by Kate Oatis



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Panelists at the Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network's conference (Photos courtesy of Skip Peterson)

DAYTON, Ohio -- "People must be valued for what they are and not in spite of what they are, said Deborah Spini, Ph.D., during her presentation at the 5th annual Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network's conference May 18-22 at the University of Dayton.

Spini, a member of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Syracuse University in Florence, Italy, presented as part of a panel entitled: Disciplinary Perspectives on Exclusion.

She used the work of various political philosophers and the arc of globalization to make her point that, "We must embrace our partiality. We are all witnesses of the truth of Jesus Christ, and this must guide our way" of behaving in the world. Further, Spini argued, "Inclusion is not about embracing all but embracing otherness in ourselves and others. Individuals are complex."

This theme of not merely accepting differences but embracing them was key for several presenters at the conference, including Mary McClintock Fulkerson, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church and a professor at Duke University Divinity School. Her most recent book, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, looks at racial diversity and a group of people she refers to as "differently labeled."

Fulkerson argued there is a new form of racism, colorblindedness, which, though well-intentioned in its

claim not to see skin color, actually keeps a person from seeing "the realities of racism." She also argued that "white churches do not challenge the larger culture" and that "lacking opportunities for close contact" with black people inclines white people to depend on "mediated images" for categorizing them.

Her conclusion was that "ecclesial relations invite development and further discussion" so as to "connect us with world suffering and to commit us to do something about it."

[Kate Oatis is a freelance writer and director of communications for the Sisters of St. Francis, Tiffin, Ohio, and former features editor for the Diocese of Toledo's *Catholic Chronicle*.]

Editor's Note: For more from the, see Oatis other stories: **Immigration, exclusion and the church** and **From neoexclusivism to humility**. Look for a wrap-up from the conference to appear this week.

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