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Scholars aim to foster ecclesial unity

by Kate Oatis



Gerard Mannion (Photos by Skip Peterson)

DAYTON, OHIO -- A group of scholars representing diverse ecclesial, ethnic and methodological backgrounds gathered at the University of Dayton, Ohio, May 18-22 for the Fifth Annual Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network conference titled "Ecclesiology and Exclusion." They arrived from many countries, including Belgium, Kenya, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia, and throughout the United States, to discuss what the church can and ought to do to foster unity among Christians and to be more inclusive while staying true to tradition.

Gerard Mannion's 2007 book, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*, provided the impetus for the conference, according to organizer Dennis Doyle, University of Dayton religious studies professor. In his book, Mannion says the church can help to heal the rift between contemporary culture and the Christian faith by adjusting and balancing its ecclesial vision (self-understanding) with its ecclesial practices (day-to-day life) and by resisting an impulse to neoexclusivism, which regards the "Christian faith and church in superior terms."

Mannion, professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego and chair of the

Ecclesiological Investigations Network, said organizers hoped the conference would further the network's ecumenical mission, "at a time when polemics, cynicism, apathy and hard-line attitudes prevail across our societies as they do throughout the church."

According to the Ecclesiological Investigations Web site, "an abiding principle" of the network is "that the church must be inclusive if it is to be of continuing relevance in the world in a positive sense."

The themes of migration, racial justice, the role of women, sacramental practices, church culture, poverty and the role of women, and a presentation of disciplinary perspectives provided the framework for panel discussions, after which people presented their research in breakout sessions.

In his presentation on migration, Gioacchino Campese, a Scalabrinian missionary from Italy, offered suggestions to a church he says is marginalizing an already beleaguered population. "Immigrants are a people of great faith," Campese said. "Many of them are leaving the church because they do not feel welcome and many are being deported by U.S. authorities."

He said that "ecclesiology must help to provide a vision" by once again imagining "ourselves as ... a church on a journey," which shouldn't be difficult because "the world is characterized by mobility."

Campese spoke on a panel with the University of Dayton's Mark Ensalaco, who argued that the "immigration situation is a moral crisis," and that the church must translate its message of social justice into a "persuasive political message" so as to have a more pronounced effect on the formulation of immigration law.

On another panel, Fr. Bryan Massingale, a priest of the Milwaukee archdiocese and author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, argued that racial justice "is an ecclesial question" but that it is often addressed simply as a "moral question." Asking, "Can we be the body of Christ if we are racist?" Massingale said theologians need to tap into the nonrational centers of imagination and symbol to heal racism and that the "sacramental imagination can play a pivotal role toward racial justice."

Leslie Picca, a University of Dayton sociology professor, also emphasized the notion that the Christian faith "has a role to play in racial equality." She said colorblindness, understood by many to be a nonracist response, is not a solution because, for one thing, "it ignores the differences that we should celebrate."

Nigerian Jesuit Fr. Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, a theologian at Hekima College Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya, emphasized that though "racism is a reality in the world and the church," there are resources in Catholic social teaching for racial reconciliation. As a community, the church must, he said, become better at providing "self-critique." He also stressed that the "voices of the victims must be heard" and that the church must be sure that it is not suppressing those voices.

Christopher Spotts, a doctoral student at Marquette University in Milwaukee, said he appreciated the focus on race. "I'm here because I have an interest in black theology and I want to be involved in the conversation. The heartbeat of the argument is that racism has to be addressed theologically if we are to take it seriously."

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Several presenters shared their ideas on the role of women in the Roman Catholic church by responding to

Phyllis Zagano's book, introduced at the conference, *Women & Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority*.



Zagano, a senior research associate-in-residence and adjunct professor of

religion at Hofstra University in Long Island, N.Y., and a columnist for *NCR*, said she got the idea for the book when Catholic writer David Gibson called her to talk about Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz's excommunication of members of Call to Action in Nebraska.

"I was trying to understand who's in and who's out. Mainly, what is the Catholic church's problem with women?" She said the more she studied the problem, the more she found a "historical, reflexive distaste for ... women in any ministry." In the book, she offers her argument for a female diaconate.

Miriam Haar, a doctoral research scholar at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Conn., said Zagano's argument "for the ordination of women deacons in the Roman Catholic church is convincing."

During her presentation, however, Haar asked, "I am wondering what the ordination of women deacons in the Roman Catholic church would mean in regard to the ordination of woman as priests and bishops." She argued that the ordination of women deacons must be based on a "theology of ministry" and have "profound ecclesiological foundations."

Sandra Mazzolini of the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome said the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) provided "theological benchmarks" and an "ecumenical model" for developing female ministries. She cautioned, however, against "throwing modern perspectives onto the past," and said it is important to understand the perspectives in the early church that led to "both doctrinal and institutional changes and developments" regarding female ministries.

In many cases, conference attendees were also presenters, as was the case for David Johns, associate professor of theology at Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Ind. "I came here wanting to meet and talk with others thinking about liberation theology and immigration issues. I'm really pleased with the range of perspectives."

Very much in the hearts of those in attendance was the opportunity for future discussion.

"The conference in Dayton has been a unique opportunity to address ... in an ecumenical setting, ecclesiological issues that are the core ... of the debate on the interpretation of Vatican II," said Massimo Faggioli, assistant professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. The conference created "a framework for the future debate," he said, especially as the upcoming 50-year anniversary of Vatican II "will remind us the pivotal role of inclusion/exclusion" in theological debates.

At a final session, the consensus was that the conversation will continue. (See sidebar.)

"We wished to have the difficult questions and challenges tabled and encourage genuine, open and honest conversation and discussion," Mannion said. "Those hopes were far exceeded. Friendships and

collaborative alliances were forged, understanding increased and hope renewed.?

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

Conversation to continue in Assisi

Preparations are well under way to continue the conversation begun at the 'Ecclesiology and Exclusion' conference in Dayton, Ohio, in May. The Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network has scheduled its next meeting in Assisi, Italy, April 17-20, 2012, on the theme 'Where We Dwell in Common: Pathways for Dialogue in the 21st Century.'

According to the event brochure, the gathering will explore the theme of dialogue from the perspectives of the past, present and future. 'The aim is to discern new ways, means and methods of advancing the ecumenical cause ... with renewed energy for a new century,' it says.

Assisi was chosen as the venue because of its long association with openness, charity, dialogue, peace, harmony and communion, the brochure says.

'We are seeking as wide a range of voices to be present as possible,' says Gerard Mannion, theology professor at the University of San Diego and chairman of the Assisi organizing committee. 'Our target is to have a minimum of one-third of those present coming from outside Europe and North America and at least one-quarter of those present being new and emerging scholars -- tomorrow's generation of ecumenists.'

The group is also seeking a wide range of supporting institutions, organizations and individual donors. 'If your institution or organization could consider helping to support the scholars who would otherwise not be able to participate, that would be a wonderful act of ecumenical solidarity,' Mannion said.

-- *Kate Oatis*

Editor's Note: More of Oatis' reporting from the conference **can be found here**.

Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network has a Web page at www.ei-research.net. The network has also recently started a Facebook page. Go to Facebook.com and search for 'Ecclesiological Investigations Research Network.'

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