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Religious men address issues of discipleship, service

by Catholic News Service



Abbot Giles P. Hayes of St. Mary's Abbey in Morristown, N.J., is the new president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

ORLANDO, Fla. -- Discipleship and service were two key issues addressed during the Aug. 3-6 assembly of the Congregation of Major Superiors of Men in Orlando.

"Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John becomes the occasion for Jesus to explain and to present the life of discipleship as participation and identification with the life of Jesus," said Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in his keynote address at the CMSM assembly.

Cardinal Turkson outlined how leaders of men's religious orders, and the priests and brothers under their care, can better exercise discipleship.

"Begin with a realistic attitude, approaching the difficulties of the present time with discernment," the cardinal advised, drawing on some insights from Pope Benedict XVI. "Ground the work in fundamental

values, a new vision for the future.

"With confidence rather than resignation, take up the new responsibilities. Be open to profound cultural renewal, with confidence and hope," the cardinal continued. "Commit to new rules, new forms of commitment, with coherence and consistency."

Cardinal Turkson acknowledged the challenge. But, he added, "as a bishop friend of mine from the northwest part of the U.S.A. would say, 'We need to stop being compliant Catholic-Christians, and start being converted Catholic-Christians.'"

Jesuit Father Thomas Massaro, a professor of moral theology at Boston College, offered his insights on encouraging action.

"It is just not reasonable to expect to impact lives in the most profound ways through classroom activities alone," Father Massaro said in an Aug. 6 address. "If you want to change the world, you will have to contribute to transforming people, not just reshuffling the ideas in their heads."

He added, "True conversion for social justice springs from personal experience and exposure to social problems and engagement in efforts to solve them. You cannot succeed without some ideas and intellectual commitments, but principles only get you so far. At the risk of lapsing into cliches, it is a matter of hearts and hands, not just heads."

When reading Pope Benedict XVI's encyclicals "Deus Caritas Est" ("God Is Love") and "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), Father Massaro said, "somewhat ambiguous passages in both documents have sent social ethicists of various stripes to their keyboards, proof-texting and cherry-picking sentences that purport to reveal the true mind of the present pontiff regarding what the church should or should not be doing in the social realm."

At issue, he said, are "several unresolved questions about how best to serve the poor and to appeal to the powerful in order to implement the principles of Catholic social teaching. Have Catholic relief agencies grown too professional and worldly in tenor? Have they lost their religious distinctiveness due to excessive involvements with governments and secular organizations? What are the most appropriate and effective ways to serve the poor and to transform the world to foster greater social justice?"

"We cannot answer these questions today," Father Massaro said, but it is clear the Catholic Church "will continue to understand its mission as including ample engagement with the political and economic realms. ... There will continue to be a crucial role for men and women religious to play in front-line work for both charity and justice.

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Dominican Sister Barbara Reid, vice president and academic dean at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, posed some questions of her own for CMSM conferees to consider.

"How do leaders of communities of men religious aid their members in ongoing study of the Gospel that leads to liberative preaching, teaching and evangelizing?" she asked in her Aug. 5 address. "What practices help religious leaders discern the correct timing for prophetic action? What time is it now?"

Further, Sister Reid asked, "What can your patterns of collaboration with women and laymen as equal partners in your ministries offer to the rest of the church at a time when some would draw stricter

delineation between ordained and nonordained ministry?"

Her questions, she noted, were in keeping with one of the focuses of the assembly -- understanding "more deeply what is the example that foot-washer Jesus has given us, and what is exemplary leadership today based on Jesus' life appointed for others."

Sacred Heart Father Thomas Cassidy, CMSM's outgoing president, issued a call to action to priests and brothers, who, if they heeded it, would do so knowing they would rub some people the wrong way.

"I'm sure you have heard the expression: 'If we really preached the Gospel we would empty the churches.' There is certainly some truth to that sentiment," said Father Cassidy, who was succeeded as president by Abbot Giles P. Hayes of St. Mary's Abbey in Morristown, N.J., at the close of the assembly.

"Try preaching on immigration reform and the respect we should and must show to the undocumented and see how well that goes over. Or talk to people about the right labor has to organize and see how that goes over with many sitting out there in the pews," Father Cassidy said. "Or raise the issue of health care as a right every human is owed.

"Or speak to people of the duty of governments to promote the common good, and yes, that means taxes, and see how far that will endear you to those sitting in the pews."

Father Cassidy added, "It is true that the best kept secret of the church is its social teachings. The really sad thing is that we've kept it a secret from our own people. Imagine what a force for change it would be if all the people in the pews really understood and bought into the rich tradition of the church's social teachings.

"Especially if they could see the link between Sunday's Eucharist and life lived the other six days."

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