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Maryknoll Centennial Symposium: Mission as friendship

by Heidi Schlumpf

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When liberation theologian Father Gustavo Gutiérrez was asked to say a few impromptu words at the Maryknoll Centennial Symposium, he expressed gratitude for the work of Maryknoll priests and nuns in his native country of Peru, in particular for their mission of friendship.

"We do not have a true commitment to the poor without friendship," said Gutiérrez, citing Jesus' words, "I no longer call you servants but friends" (John 15:15). "Friends are different but equal". When we speak about the preferential option for the poor, we have to be close to them. Many people understand the witness of Maryknoll as being friends of the people."

Plenary speaker Dr. Dana Robert picked up the theme of friendship in her talk Friday afternoon. "Mission as relationship: this is where we have to go now," said Robert, director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission at the Boston University School of Theology. Robert, a United Methodist, had just returned from the interreligious Global Christian Forum in Indonesia.

"The chief motivation of young people today is to have relationships across boundaries, not saving people or even helping others," she said. "They frame their desire in mission as a desire to have a relationship with someone unlike themselves."

Often these relationships begin during short-term mission trips, which can lead to longer-term commitment, she said, citing the 172,000 United Methodist volunteers who have served those affected by Hurricane Katrina in the State of Mississippi alone.

"The desire to be in mission is out there," she said. "It starts with action and relationship, and our challenge as theologians is to build bridges so theology can come out of that."

An audience member asked if relationship and friendship are enough. Robert acknowledged the limits of friendship alone, which may not address structural injustice. "Friendship is a necessary beginning point," she said. "But you have to go into issues of peace, justice and deeper truths."

The danger of the short-term mission movement, she said, can be its "fly in, fly out" mentality. "Friendship really does mean walking with someone, learning another person's language, long-term relationships," she said. "That takes time."

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