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King's message of action and service lives on, say speakers

by Steve Euvino by Catholic News Service



The Wirt-Emerson Visual and Performing Arts High Ability Academy concert choir performs during the fifth annual tribute to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Cathedral of the Holy Angels in Gary, Ind., Jan. 8. (CNS photo/Michael McArdle, Northwest Indiana Catholic)

GARY, Ind. -- Two priests and one mayor recalled the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in two words: action and service.

Speaking Jan. 8 at Holy Angels Cathedral in Gary, the three recounted the slain civil rights leader's belief in equality and nonviolence, challenging their audience to continue that legacy.

"Martin Luther King once said, 'Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" said Father Jon Plavcan, rector of the cathedral for the Diocese of Gary. "He believed each individual possessed the power to lift himself or herself up no matter what his or her circumstances were in life. He was a person about service in the world and helping others as well."

Karen Freeman-Wilson, the newly installed mayor of Gary, asked the assembly: "What is going to cause

you to move into action?"

The first female mayor in Gary's 106-year history, Freeman-Wilson inherits a city racked with urban problems: high crime and poverty rates, low graduation rates, and buildings and neighborhoods in need of repair. This situation, the new mayor said, evokes many sentiments -- shame, fatigue, anger, and righteous indignation -- the same feelings that led others to fight slavery for equal rights.

"Righteous indignation caused Dr. King and others to move from sentiment ... to the action of the civil rights movement," said the Harvard-educated Freeman-Wilson.

People can sit idly by and abdicate their responsibility, the mayor said, or they can be part of the solution.

As followers of Christ, Freeman-Wilson said, it is not just about sharing Christ's heart or sentiment, "but his action." She added, "God's hands are our hands."

The fifth annual King tribute at the cathedral included orator Troy Patterson Thomas' rendition of Rev. King's 1963 "I have a dream" speech and musical selections by the concert choir from Wirt-Emerson Visual and Performing Arts High Ability Academy in Gary.

Father Charles Mosley, pastor at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Hammond, cited the "extraordinary faith which we share with Martin Luther King." That faith, he said, has helped break the chains of slavery, end oppressive Jim Crow laws, helped face police dogs and clubs, and even led to the White House.

"It is that same faith that allows us to continue today," Father Mosley said. "We can focus on the bad, but we must focus on the faith that keeps us strong."

In his concluding prayer, Father Mosley thanked God "for the presence of the Holy Spirit to give us courage to continue to move forward to be all we can be. We were created to do wonderful things. See Martin Luther King as the inspiration to move forward to be the wonderful people you (God) want us to be."

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Celebrating Rev. King's legacy on the feast of the Epiphany, Father Plavcan prayed, "May the light of Christ, that shining star, continue to guide us with his light in the hope of Martin Luther King to be the children of one God."

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