

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 13, 2012 at 12:17pm

Call to Action: There is no justice without racial justice

by Zoe Ryan

CTA 2012

Louisville, Ky. — Against a backdrop of a banner with the word "Aggiornamento!", speakers at Call To Action's national conference spoke of the Second Vatican Council's new way of being church in today's world.

For Call To Action, that new way cannot ignore racial justice work.

Since 2005, the church reform group based out of Chicago has been working at combating racism in facets of church and society, included its own organization.

Noted civil rights activist Diane Nash gave the keynote address Nov. 9 night here, speaking on "agapic energy," a term that goes beyond nonviolence, she said, and is derived from a Greek word for "love of humankind."

"People are never your enemy," said Nash, who was a leader of the sit-ins in the 1960s civil rights movement.

Attitudes, systems and "-isms" (sexism, racism, etc.) are enemies, but the person is not, said Nash, who related her experience desegregating in the South.

"One of the problems with using violence to bring about social change is that you often kill individuals and leave the oppressive system, which is the real problem, untouched," she said.

Oppressors are not the only ones perpetuating the broken systems, she said. "Oppression always requires the cooperation of the oppressed. If the oppressed withdraw their cooperation from the oppressive system, that system will follow" and fall, she said.

About 1,500 people from across the country registered for the conference and more joined once the conference got under way. This year's conference had more than 400 people who had never attended a Call To Action conference before.

"There's the saying that there is no justice without racial justice," Rose Elizondo told *NCR*. Elizondo presented a workshop about issues of institutional and internalized racism.

"So if everyone is not at the table as we are speaking about reform, as we are trying to collaboratively bring reform in our church, then we are not going to have a powerful reformation movement," said Elizondo, who does restorative justice work at San Quentin State Prison in California.

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"It's part of our call to follow Jesus in creating justice, peace and love in the world," said Myra Brown, a member of Call To Action's anti-racism team along with Elizondo. "We can't really step over oppression and feel like we're really doing that to the best of our abilities."

During her keynote, Nash recalled that people participating in the nonviolent actions in the 1960s sometimes got frustrated, but others reminded them of the importance of the work and that they were doing this "for generations yet unborn."

"And I'd like for younger people to know that we had you in mind and even though we had not met you, we loved you, and we were trying to bring about a society that was the best one we could shape for you to be born into and to come of age in."

Young adults are another focus of outreach for Call To Action and another focus of the conference. Matthew Fox, creation theologian and Episcopal priest, praised the "wisdom of the Occupy generation" and put his faith in the youth during his keynote.

He also spoke of the darkness of both religion and society today and the good news that comes out of the darkness.

"Church is a verb. It is where the Holy Spirit is at work," he said. Whether you work inside structures or outside, you have a call to embody the Holy Spirit to put your energy and talents into something -- don't be an ecclesial couch potato, he said.

"The Holy Spirit does not retire," Fox said.

Other keynoters included Mohamed Abdul-Azeez, an imam who is the religious leader of SALAM Islamic Center in Sacramento, Calif., and Patricia Fresen, a member of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests from South Africa who assisted the development of that organization in North America. Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of the social justice lobby NETWORK and of "Nuns on the Bus" fame, gave a homily at the liturgy on Sunday.

The 2012 Leadership Award went to Franciscan Sr. Pat Farrell, currently past president of the Leadership

Conference of Women Religious. She was president in April when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its doctrinal assessment criticizing parts of LCWR.

Presentation speakers Nov. 10 included Enrique Morones, the founder of Border Angels, an all-volunteer organization that advocates for human rights and immigration reform with a focus on the border between the United States and Mexico.

When people are dehumanized, others find it acceptable to attack them, he said.

"We are all supposed to love our fellow man, and it is important that we practice what we preach," he said.

At another session, Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle told stories of the former gang members he works with in Los Angeles at Homeboy Industries, the largest gang member rehabilitation and reentry program in the nation, and spoke of the "exquisite mutuality in kinship."

"How do we seek to obliterate once and for all the illusion that we are separate? Where there is no us and them -- there's just us?"

Other presentations included talks on a Catholic transgender narrative, stories of women in Latin America, violence and nonviolence in the Middle East and Central Asia, and numerous caucuses.

This year's conference, called "Justice Rising," was created to focus around racism. The first time the conference addressed racism directly as a theme in 2007, attendance was down from other years.

Anti-racism has been on Call To Action's agenda from its beginning in Detroit and Chicago, but there was no strategic plan on how to go about breaking systematic racism. In 2005, the anti-racism initiative went into play, said Amy Sheber Howard, who is on Call To Action's anti-racism team.

It was a tough decision to have a conference on a sensitive topic such as race in 2007 and know that there would be a financial loss, especially in an economic time in the U.S. when many nonprofits were losing money, said current Call To Action board co-president David Saavedra.

But they went with it, Sheber Howard said.

It spoke as a sign of a directional shift for the organization

This year, the decision to hold the conference in Louisville is a continuation of the group's commitment to changing "business as usual" and reaching other people to engage in the conversation and see how the organization is transformed by that, Sheber Howard said.

The conference will be back in Milwaukee, its common host, next year, but will make its debut in Memphis, Tenn., in 2014.

Part of what moved Call To Action members to follow this anti-racism initiative more forcefully was something members of Pax Christi imparted to them: that if they did not do the work of anti-racism, every other thing they did on behalf of peacemaking and justice -- the "very heart of who-we-say-we-are things" -- would be done in a racist way, Sheber Howard said.

The groups training Call To Action in anti-racism skills told members that it would shake their organization. But after struggling with discussions of mission and direction, the board ultimately decided to adopt the anti-racism initiative into their identity as Call To Action.

"Some people would wonder, 'Well, why would an organization want to embark on this kind of journey?' " said Saavedra, who is also on the anti-racism team. "Because the bottom line is that it's going to look very different at the end hopefully, wherever the end is. That could be 15, that could be 20 years down the road."

Part of the group's plan is to look at institutional racism in the world, structures of power and of what makes the lack of diversity exist in its organization.

Years ago, "we used to assume that we did things in an inclusive way because we value justice and we've got good hearts," Sheber Howard said. From their anti-racism work, she said, they've learned that those things aren't enough because of privilege, perpetuated systems of power, and ingrained habits that are beyond an individual's desire.

Saavedra said that it is a sensitive topic for people, including those Call To Action members who value justice, because "no one wants to be called a racist" and that can be the implication with discussions like this.

But these discussions of how people are different and what that means, sharing experiences, talking honestly in conversation -- those are the beginning steps, he said.

"It's not an easy thing because it challenges us personally, and at times we may feel like we're being attacked." The key, though, is to stay in a relationship, to speak respectfully with each other about differences and feelings, he said. "So it's hard to do. You've got to have that environment to be able to do it in that's a safe space."

Saavedra said he thinks this will change the makeup of the organization, but it will be a long process. "It's not going to happen in two years, five years or 10 years. It's probably going to be longer."

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