

A social action summer institute

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Nowhere else on earth does a local church invest the time and treasure fine-tuning the art of pastoral ministry on a local level as in the United States. The sheer volume of conferences, in-services, studies, academic programs and publications devoted to "best practices" and on-the-job training is staggering, making it one reason that parish ministry in America is the envy of the Catholic world.

This week I'm at one such event, the "Social Action Summer Institute," a program for diocesan and parish social action personnel, sponsored by the National Pastoral Life Center and held at the University of Dayton July 16-21. The Cincinnati archdiocese is a co-sponsor.

Attendees are people intensely concerned with the social teaching of the Catholic Church. It's the kind of crowd, for example, where an announcement that the campus bowling alley would be open Thursday night triggered little response, but the news that "fair trade beer" would be served generated sustained applause.

My task was to give the closing keynote address, on the future of social action in the Catholic church as seen from Rome.

I wasn't at the conference as a reporter, so I'm not in a position to provide a detailed account of its discussions. I can say, however, that among many other threads of conversation, I picked up a strong sense of the need to bring together pro-life and pro-justice advocacy efforts at both the parish and diocesan levels. This reflects the practical reality that these tasks in the church today are often carried out by different people, and even different offices. There was a general longing to think past stereotypes that often peg people involved in justice work as "soft" on abortion, and people committed to pro-life activity as indifferent to the poor.

While no magic bullet solutions were floated, the mere fact that people from "pro-life" and "peace and justice" circles mixed during the week already suggests that something interesting is moving.

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